



Winter with Eleven by the dark inside me

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Summary: It's the winter of '84/'85, shortly after the events of Season 2. Eleven and Mike are settling in to spend their first winter together as a couple, alongside their friends and families. Blatant Mileven of course (they're just too darn cute). Lots and lots of fluff. Smut in some chapters. Lumax/Jancy/Jopper are alluded to. Some Season 3 story beats were used for inspiration.

1. The Game

[July update] I'm so glad and humbled that people are still enjoying my story (thank you all!), and still relieved the events of S3 don't really affect it too much, even if a lot of the assumptions I made and incorporated have now well and truly been squashed. Apologies, I don't have much time at the moment to work on Mileven-related prompts and oneshots but if you PM me I can at least keep building a little list to work on at some point in the future.

Hi everyone. Long time lurker, first time contributor. This fic actually languished on my HDD for a long time... I'd go back and tweak it now and again, add and remove bits here and there, change the plot around a bit, that sort of thing. But ultimately life kept throwing its curveballs and getting in the way, I got a bad case of writer's block and let the story go to seed, figuring it would never see the light of day.

However I recently gained a new amount of clarity and focus, aided by the fact that the Season 3 trailer finally dropped, which gave me a rough idea in which direction to go, and make a whole bunch of adjustments to suit. I guess this is as fit for public consumption as it'll ever be.

All chapters are connected to each other in some way, and some earlier chapters make allusions to events in later ones. The timeline jumps around a bit, but the story takes place over the winter of 1984/85, after the events of Season 2 and well before Season 3 begins. You could probably consider these a series of cute little oneshots from that time period, with an interconnected narrative linking them all together. Plenty of easter eggs and callbacks abound for avid watchers of the show.

The romance aspect is best described as shameless fluff, with most of the smut occurring in random chapters where the plot calls for it, and a bit of fetish content creeping in (none in this chapter though) - you've been warned. There is a *tiny* amount of smut in this chapter. I tried to write the Mileven pairing as pure as possible, keeping to the characterization depicted by the

creators. Lumax, Jancy and Jopper are all alluded to. Season 3 may come along and shake things up a little though.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 2, 1985

The Game

The sound of your heart

Lets me know you want it

Whisper in my ear that

You want it all

- **Tokyo**, Timecop1983

The die clattered noisily onto the table, and came to rest with several young faces crowded expectantly around it.

"*Fourteen!* Yes! Eat your heart out, infernal spear chucker!"

It was a crisp, clear winter's morning in the small town of Hawkins, the second day of the new year, 1985, and the final week of Christmas vacation. It had snowed a little overnight, and the ground and trees remained covered in a heavy blanket of powder that refused to melt on account of the chilly temperature. Most of the gang had assembled inside the basement of the Wheeler household to resume the campaign of D&D they'd kicked off the day before. The only member not present was Will, who had gone into town for his regular check-up following the encounter with the Mind Flayer at Halloween, but he would be joining the rest of the party soon enough.

"Lucas the Ranger takes careful aim and fires his flaming arrow with deadly accuracy at the advancing infernal spear chucker!"

As the size of their party had expanded over the last year, the small square table the boys used for previous campaigns had been ditched in favor of a long, low slung coffee table that Dustin and Lucas acquired from a yard sale elsewhere in the neighborhood. They'd dragged it into the basement alongside the old couch, and arranged a bunch of beanbags and comfy cushions around the rest of its

perimeter.

It was on the old couch that Mike and Eleven were currently sitting. Or more accurately, cuddling. Ever since Christmas the pair had been virtually inseparable. Max and Lucas sat directly opposite them on one of the oversized beanbags, and Dustin had positioned himself at the end of the table, relishing his new role as Dungeon Master.

Max, and to a lesser extent Eleven, had wanted a crash course in D&D over the break and Lucas was busy explaining another game mechanic to the newbies as they played. "So the fourteen I just rolled with this D20, it's called the attack roll, and then I add my attack bonus to that number, *and then* I gotta make sure the total number is the same or higher than the AC of this monster we're currently fighting. Otherwise I won't be able to roll for damage..."

With her competitive nature, Max proved to be a fast learner, picking up the gist of the game quicker than anticipated much to Lucas's delight. Eleven on the other hand was more content to sit there quietly, listening to the others chatter, politely passing when it was her turn, and watching the game progress through wide eyes.

Mike was only half listening to Lucas's lesson, far more aware of the warm body pressed tightly against him, her hand clasped in his. His *girlfriend*. He still couldn't believe how lucky he was, to have lost Eleven and then have her walk back into his life nearly a year later when things were literally going Upside Down. He'd never given up hope, and it gave him the fuzzies knowing El hadn't given up on him either.

"Mike? What is 'AC'?"

He loved El's smile, loved her body, loved her innocence, loved the way her hair had grown out... hell, Mike Wheeler loved everything about her really. Jane "Eleven" Hopper was perfect. Best of all, he loved that she'd said *yes* when he nervously asked her if she'd like to go out with him, the day after the Snow Ball. Their courtship had progressed like a whirlwind after that, and they'd found it hard to keep their hands off each other both alone and in public.

"Mike."

He'd been a bit self-conscious around his friends the first time they'd presented as a couple, but it helped when Lucas and Max announced they were going steady as well, and he finally relaxed when he realized the rest of the gang was 100% supportive and accepting of the way things had panned out. Of course it had opened them up to a whole new world of endless teasing and eye-rolling, but it was part of the deep bond they all shared. El's enthusiasm and loving nature more than made up for the awkwardness.

"Miiiiike..."

Mostly, everyone was glad Mike Wheeler was back to his old self after almost a year of being an emotional moping wreck.

"**MIKE!** Pay attention you dumbass."

Mike snapped out of his daydream and blinked a couple times. "Huh. What?"

"Your *girlfriend* asked you a question," Lucas said, exasperated. Dustin was trying and failing to hide a smirk.

"Ohhh. Umm, I'm sorry El," He ruffled her hair in apology and leaned against her affectionately. "Listening now."

"What is 'AC'?" she repeated quietly, innocent eyes staring into his.

"AC? It means *armor class*," he explained. "A bad guy with a lower armor class makes him more difficult to hit because you need to roll a high number and the probability of getting a high number is small."

"Proba... bility?" El repeated slowly.

"You know, like *chance*," Mike said. "There's a small chance of rolling a high number and hitting a bad guy who's got a low AC. But if it happens, you get lucky."

"Yeah, getting lucky... like Mike did to end up with *you*," Dustin suggested to Eleven unhelpfully, finishing his sentence with that creepy purring noise he did so well. Then, "OW!" as Lucas elbowed him sharply in the side.

"It's all to do with math, El," Max chimed in. "When we have study time tomorrow I can go over it with you."

The dark haired girl smiled shyly. "Thank you Max." Max and Eleven's friendship had gotten off to a rocky start, as Eleven struggled with the possibility of facing another competitor for Mike's affection. But once it became clear the redhead was far more interested in Lucas, the ice had thawed quickly and the two were now thick as thieves. El had begun studying with Max a few nights a week and learning a few more social cues along the way. Both of them were also glad to have each other to confide in, because sometimes boys simply *didn't. get. it.*

Just then their Supercoms crackled into life. "This is Will. Come in team, over."

Dustin, as usual, was onto it in a flash. "Dustin here, over. What's the sitrep? Over," he answered into the mic of the headset he'd rigged up for hands free communication.

"Mom, Hopper, and me are just leaving the doctor's office..." Will's response came back punctuated by bursts of static, indicating he was pushing the limits of his walkie talkie's range. "I suppose we'll be at Mike's in about fifteen minutes, over."

Lucas grabbed his own Supercom from amongst the cans of soda and empty bags of junk food littering the table. "Byers, please tell me you'll bring some donuts back with you. It's ten thirty and we've already run out of snacks, over."

El reached for Mike's shiny new Supercom that he'd recently received for Christmas and pressed Transmit. "And Eggos?" she asked hopefully. "Over."

The speaker crackled again. "Kid, what did I tell you about eating too much junk food?" It was Chief Hopper this time. There was a pause, then he continued somewhat reluctantly, "Joyce twisted my arm though. *Fine*, we'll stop at the store on the way back and get more supplies. Over and out."

El's eyes lit up, and she turned to her boyfriend who gave her a quick squeeze and peck on the cheek. She responded by sliding her hand up

his trousers...

Dustin cleared his throat a little too loudly, firstly to restore a sense of order and secondly to stave off any impending awkwardness. "AAANY-way. I believe Grand Magus Eleven is up next?" He offered her the dice container. "The infernal spear chucker is wounded by Lucas the Ranger's valiant attack, but still alive, and is getting very angry the more wounded it gets! What will you do?"

El shook her head. "Sorry Dustin. Still learning. Withdraw?"

"It's okay," Max cut in before Dustin could reply. "El, how about you roll Aid Another, to help Mike when it's his turn?" She handed El the 20 sided die.

Mike leaned forward. "Do you remember how this works?"

El nodded. "I need to roll higher than *one-zero*. Ten. After that, I can choose to give you a bonus to attack or defense."

The others nodded back in agreement.

"Okay, here goes..." She took a deep breath, and threw the die across the basement.

"Hey!" exclaimed Dustin as the others broke out into more laughter. He scrambled to his feet and made his way over to the far side of the room. "Oh man. Where the hell did it go?"

"Will's gonna be mad if we can't find his *precious* D20," Max said to Lucas. "We'd better go help." They both got up and followed Dustin, leaving El and Mike on the couch.

El watched them go, then turned to Mike with a sly smile. "Now we're all alone..." She slid her hand back up his trousers to his crotch.

Mike jumped slightly but didn't force her hand away. "You did that on *purpose*?" His expression relaxed as a certain part of him began to wake up, and he moved to discreetly slide one of his own hands up under her sweater in return. *She's not wearing a bra*, he realized.

El shook her curls and nuzzled against his neck. "Not on purpose.

Think I need to be more gentle next time."

"Haha. I guess. Don't throw it, just rattle it around in your hands and drop it on the game board. Or just aim for Lucas or Dustin next time," Mike replied. His fingers found a hardening nipple, cupped it gently. "Oh, El. Maybe we shouldn't be doing this right now?"

"No, keep doing it. Feels good." Her fingers caressed the bulge in his crotch, found his zipper. "They aren't looking."

Just then from across the room there was a satisfied shout. "Found it!"

El sighed and pulled her hand away. Mike reluctantly did the same with his. "There'll be time later. Hopper and Mom and Dad are letting you stay the night, remember?" He nibbled on her ear then grinned wickedly. "Later, when the others are gone we can put on some scary movies and fool around. We can stay down here in the basement *all night*."

El smiled a sad adorable smile at him, then rested her head on his shoulder. "Fool around later, cuddles for now. Halfway happy."

Mike hurriedly readjusted his pants and El smoothed down her sweater before the others returned to their designated places around the table. Dustin plonked the die on the game board and shot El a look that was only partially annoyed.

"Sorry. I need to be more gentle." El picked up the die again, shook it around in her hands. She let go and the die clattered to the table. "Twelve," she declared. "I give Mike... the attack bonus."

Dustin whistled and made a note on his gamesheet. "The mighty Grand Magus Eleven deftly sidesteps the spear chucker and comes to the aid of her Paladin lover, by granting him 2 extra points on his next attack!" he boomed proudly.

"And a kiss too. For getting lucky," El added, making Mike blush again, but before she could do anything the outside door to the basement flew open behind them to reveal Will's small form, wrapped in so many layers of clothing he resembled a bear cub,

followed by a giant gust of freezing cold wind.

"WILL!" shouted Dustin, bounding up off the floor and giving his friend a determined fist bump.

"Hey Dustin. Hey Max. Hey Lucas," Will replied, looking around the room as he greeted his friends. His eyes settled on El and Mike snuggled up together on the couch and a shit-eating grin formed on his face. "Hey *lovebirds*." He dusted himself off, hung up his coat and went to join the others around the table.

"Byers! Shut the door first," complained Max. "You're letting out all the heat!"

"Yeah well, maybe there's no need for that," joked Will. "Wheeler here is blushing so hard his face could heat the whole town for a year."

The entire group laughed, and even Mike had to crack a smile at that. El squeezed his hand reassuringly and looked up at Will. "How are you feeling?"

"Great, actually. A bit tired but Doc said I might be able to come off these awful meds soon." He closed the basement door and turned back to the rest of the group. "Hopper and Mom won't let me near any junk food until I finish taking them. Well, Hop doesn't really care, but he plays along just so Mom doesn't get mad or anything."

They all laughed again. Hopper and Joyce had grown closer in the two months following Bob's heroic sacrifice at the Hawkins lab. The kids wouldn't admit it out loud of course, but it was heartwarming to see the gruff, no-nonsense chief of police and Will's slightly manic, hypochondriac mother much happier than they'd ever been in the past few years. Even Hopper had become less of a pain in the butt since he'd officially adopted Eleven, but could still be extremely intimidating, just like a typical policeman. Mike in particular remained a bit apprehensive of him, and with good reason after all.

"Anyway, enough of this *gas-baggin*," Dustin said with a flourish at Will, "now that Will the Wise is here, let us resume our *cam-paggin*!" Everyone groaned at his lame-ass rhyme, and Max made a grab for the dice container.

"*Finally*, Byers. I'm tired of Dustin automatically withdrawing every time it's your turn, your character must be halfway across the other side of the map by now and we still need heals. Did you bring snacks?"

"Oh yeah, Hopper and Mom were meant to bring them in. They're probably upstairs still talking to Mrs. Wheeler." He reached into his pocket and fished out an apple. "Mom says I'm only allowed to have fruit and water today. Man I hate those pills."

As if on cue, the other door at the top of the stairs opened and Hopper poked his head into the basement. "Is it safe to come down?"

"NO!" yelled Dustin.

"Well tough shit, I'm coming down anyway. Wheeler, you better not have your hand up my daughter's skirt," came the reply.

"GROSS!" yelled Dustin.

"I'm wearing jeans anyway, not a skirt," muttered El to nobody in particular.

There was the sound of rustling, followed by footsteps. A moment later Hopper appeared holding two big shopping bags full of snacks. "Don't eat it all so quickly this time," the big man grumbled. "It's freezing out there and we're not taking you to the store if you run out again. There might be a storm coming too, the radio's been going off all morning and I've got a few things round town to investigate."

Joyce appeared at the top of the stairs. "Hop? Ready to go? Hi kids!" They all greeted her cheerfully.

"In a minute." Hopper set the bags down on the other table, stopped and looked around the basement pointedly, eyes falling on the old blanket fort for just a moment, then acknowledged his daughter and her boyfriend. "Wheeler. El, you have fun tonight, but remember what me and Aunt Joyce said. We both gotta go to work now. Love you." He ruffled El's hair lovingly and gave Mike a stern nod.

Joyce walked up behind him. "You kids enjoy your game. Mike, take care of El okay? Will, there's more apples and water in the bag over

there. Jonathan is going to bring you home later. He and Nancy have gone out ice skating and to a movie, isn't that adorable?"

Dustin rolled his eyes.

"Thanks for the snacks Mrs. Byers, Chief Hopper!" said Lucas.

"You're welcome kid. Alright, we're going. Wheeler? Don't do anything stupid." Hopper turned and walked back up the stairs with Joyce. The door shut behind them.

"Okay. Nice. Great. Now can we *please* play some D&D?" wheedled Dustin impatiently, clearly not interested in making any more small talk. "It feels like we haven't made any progress all morning."

There was a chorus of acknowledgements, Max and Lucas grabbed more snacks and sodas off the table, and the gang finally settled in to the task at hand.

Two hours later, Lucas called time during a particularly vicious and drawn-out fight. "Whoa, whoa, Dustin, come on this is bullshit. The Rat King is almost invincible and we're getting slaughtered here!"

Dustin held his hands up in mock protest. "Hey, it's not MY fault the party's still not playing at full strength. El, you *really* need to start attacking more. You have such tubular stats!"

El glanced around at her friends. "Yeah, come on, El!" Will said encouragingly. "Will the Wise can resurrect you if it doesn't work out."

"My dearest Eleven, we're not gonna laugh if you throw a dud roll!" Max pleaded. "Unleash the Grand Magus!"

El's shoulders sagged a bit in defeat, but then she pulled herself together and smiled a secret smile at Mike, who gazed back curiously.

"Okay. I cast... I mean, Grand Magus Eleven casts Greater Pyroblast." She enunciated the words carefully as she rolled the D20 dramatically around in her cupped hands, drawing out the suspense,

and finally let go of the die. It fell to the table, rolled a few times, kept rolling, stopped rolling...

She tilted her head fractionally.

The die tumbled just one more time, landing on 20. A hushed silence fell over the room.

Dustin glanced at his gamesheet. "Okay. Okay, great. Shit, critical roll." He pushed a pair of D10s towards her. "Eleven utters an incantation of Greater Pyroblast, and the gods smile upon her as the giant ball of flame headshots the Rat King for critical damage!"

Again, she rolled the dice around in her hands and let them fly.

Again, they hit the table and kept rolling...

Again, she tilted her head...

Both landing on 10.

Silence.

And then Dustin squealed, "Hey. **HEY!** *No cheating!*"

The room erupted into raucous chaos, everyone started talking all at once. Mike laughed and hugged El closer to him as she turned away to wipe her nose surreptitiously.

"God, that was so cute. The look on Dustin's face..." he whispered amongst the cacophany of sound that was erupting around them, and once again he felt a tremendous surge of warm fuzzy feelings as El embraced and kissed him warmly in return. He didn't even care whether anyone was watching. For a moment he remained lost in his own thoughts, replaying the events - some fortuitous, others heartbreaking - which had brought him and El back together and guided them to this point in time, right here, right now.

A gentle tug on his sleeve brought Mike back to reality. "Was getting boring anyway. Eggos?" El suggested hopefully.

Mike was suddenly painfully aware of how badly his stomach was

rumbling.

Thank you for reading!

This was written while a playlist of mixed '80s hits (similar to the ones found on the show), vintage and modern synthwave, and of course the ST original soundtrack all played in the background. Give it a try, you might find yourself on the same wavelength as I was when writing.

Avid D&D players, please excuse my mangling of the rules and regulations. I'm a lapsed super-casual from years back and really don't know my way around it all that well anymore. Perhaps consider that a group of 13-year-olds may not be as strict about the rules as grown-ups would be, especially not during the early '80s when the game was extremely convoluted and difficult to learn. Any help cleaning up the D&D aspect would be greatly appreciated!

2. A Few Weeks Earlier

This chapter was the source of most of my early writer's block - I had to get inside both El's and Mike's heads a mere day after the Snow Ball and come up with their dueling viewpoints. Didn't help that it was originally the first chapter as well. In the end I just had to keep on writing, and come back to it later as I found ways around the creative hurdles.

Originally there was a big Hopper-centric 'second half', which turned out quite dark and tense so I ended up spinning it off into a chapter of its own. This is the less wangsty, more fluffy and extremely smutty 'first half' of the original piece.

Smut ahead. Ye been warned.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 16, 1984

A Few Weeks Earlier

*I wasn't looking for deliverance
When you walked in from the wilderness
I was yours and you were mine
But everything returns on time to the static
- **Static**, Timecop1983*

Mike and Eleven looked up from the TV in startled surprise at the sound of a loud crash from outside, followed by an equally loud bellow. "**God damn it!** This timber frame's too short, and these panes of glass just won't fit!"

El glanced at Mike and rolled her eyes. She'd clearly had to deal with this a lot over the past year. He smirked back in response, and she took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. She felt a small flush of pride when he didn't let go. A few moments later the door flew open and Hopper strode into the cabin with a grumpy expression on his face, followed by Will's brother Jonathan.

It was Sunday, the day after the Hawkins Middle Snow Ball. Hopper had somehow wrangled the time off work and convinced Jonathan into helping him patch up the old cabin so he and Eleven wouldn't freeze completely to death over winter. Mike, sensing an opportunity to spend time with El and without the rest of the gang, had ignored Jonathan's protests and decided to tag along.

"I'm telling you, we should have brought Nancy too. She's good at measuring and design, she could help us with the curtains and the framing," Jonathan was saying. He'd spent the night at the Wheelers' after he and Nancy had chaperoned the kids safely home from the Snow Ball.

"Fine, maybe we pick her up on the way through," grumbled Hopper. "But I really don't want to inconvenience her if she's got other plans today."

"Actually the plan was Nancy and I were going to spend the day together, but that was before *someone* twisted my arm into coming over here," Jonathan replied, a little too snarkily. "Do you want me to stay here and watch these two? Or should I take Mike home and go get the bits we need?"

Hopper's eyes started tracking towards the kids curled up on the couch. Mike quickly let go of Eleven's hand, wincing slightly as he sensed her mood falter, and pretended his hardest to act like everything was normal. He didn't want to leave, but could tell the police chief still wasn't all that comfortable he'd invited himself along. "*You only just saw her last night!*" the big man had blustered at Mike when he'd spotted him standing next to Jonathan on the front steps of the cabin that chilly morning.

El felt a little hollow as Mike's hand left hers. *No no no please don't make him leave!* Spending all morning with Mike had been like a dream come true. They'd talked breathlessly about all the fun they'd had together at the Snow Ball, and laughed endlessly while recounting all the silly things they'd both spotted going on around them. They'd even made Eggos with maple syrup and hot chocolate, and were now cuddling as they watched TV, some dopey movie she'd picked out of Hopper's VHS collection.

Hop considered for a long while, then shook his head. "No, taking all this crap back into town is gonna need the two of us. The kids should be alright on their own for a bit." He turned back to Mike and El and put on his best police chief scowl. "Stay put. *I mean it.* When we get back, you can both make yourselves useful around the house. Don't want either of you going outside while we're gone, okay? *Especially* not you, miss."

El blinked. *Mike can stay?*

"Yes sir," replied Mike. *I can stay?*

"Yes Dad," El answered quietly. "We'll be good."

Some of the tension drained out of Hop's face. He was still coming to grips with being a real father again, and El knew how to tug at his heartstrings. "Okay kiddo. I'll be back soon." To Mike he said, "Don't do anything stupid," and stomped back out of the cabin.

"We'll use the secret knock. If anyone shows up that's not us and not someone we know... heck, I dunno, flip their car or something," Jonathan said half-jokingly, and shut the door behind him.

The first thing El did was flick all of the locks closed with a shake of her head, wiping the thin trickle of blood away from her nose. She shifted in her seat, waiting for the sudden fluttering in her chest to stabilize, hoping the boy next to her wouldn't notice and think she was being a weirdo.

Not long after, they heard the sound of Hopper's Blazer starting and driving away.

Mike and El slowly turned and looked at each other again.

Hopper had left them in the cabin.

Alone.

Together.

Earlier that morning, El had quickly jumped out of bed and padded over to her bedroom door as soon as she heard Hopper start sliding

the locks back. "It's only Jonathan," he had assured her, pulling the door open. Then she noticed Mike, and time just about stopped. Hopper had stomped past her, looking like he was about to burst a blood vessel as he ranted about unannounced guests, but all of her attention was focused on the gorgeously goofy boy standing sheepishly at the front door. All she cared about in the whole world right then was knowing she could be with him again.

Her mind flashed back to the present, and she asked in a soft voice, "Mike? What should we do? Watch more TV? Call friends? Make another snack?"

Truth be told, Mike Wheeler was currently not in the mood for Eggos, nor soap operas, and definitely not keen on talking to the others either. Ever since getting out of the car he'd been more nervous than a prize turkey at Thanksgiving. Hopper's front door had opened, he'd caught sight of Eleven peering out of her bedroom in her pajamas and an oversized sweater - her hair still tousled from sleep, looking like some kind of angel - and his heart had started racing at a million miles a minute knowing he could be with her again.

Now he and El had been left alone - for how long, Mike did not know - and he decided this was his best shot. He had to make it count.

He got up and walked across the room to put another log on the fire so they'd stay warm, braced himself as he watched it slowly being enveloped by the flames, then turned back and sat down again next to El.

"El," he said in a suddenly shaky voice. She looked at him expectantly through wide brown eyes, sensed his trepidation, realized he was as flustered as she was. She took his hands in hers, hoping for him to continue. Mike felt her hands trembling, but thought it could have just been from the winter cold.

"So last night, at the Snow Ball, we, uh..."

"Kissed," offered El helpfully. "It was nice."

Mike fidgeted. "Yeah. Um. So uhhh, I thought I'd lost you but I *never* gave up. And you came back, you... I..." He wasn't sure why he was

telling her this again but stumbled through it anyway. "Dancing with you last night was nice. *Kissing* you was really nice. Being with you right now is nice and *I don't want to lose you ever again!*"

"Mike. You never lost me. The whole time, I wanted to be with you. Saw you in the Void. *Every night for 353 days.*" El's eyes started welling with tears as the memories came flooding back, so Mike put his arm around her and scooted closer.

"El," he said sincerely but nervously. "Do you want to go out with me?"

"Go... out?"

"Yeah, it's um, what someone asks another person, when they like them very much." He paused and fidgeted some more, then took a deep breath and continued. "Or maybe they **LOVE** them very much. And... and they want to be closer. Closer than, umm, just friends. And I'm asking you because... ***becauseILOVEyousomuchEL.***" The crucial words rushed clumsily out of his mouth. He hung his head and studied the floor in sudden anguish. *Way to go Wheeler, you screwed that up. You're such a mess.*

El couldn't believe her ears and her heart skipped a few beats. *Mike really feels the same way about me as I do about him!* The room started spinning and suddenly she felt like the luckiest girl in the world all over again.

"Mike, I... I feel the same way. *Can't* lose you again. Yes, I want to go out with you. *I love you so much too.*" She watched as Mike digested her words, his face slowly turning from dejection into complete elation. Then she put her arms around his neck, leaning in for another kiss.

This time it felt easier, more natural, *exquisite*. In that instant, both Mike Wheeler and Jane "Eleven" Hopper knew that no matter what the future would throw at them, they were fully committed to each other.

The kiss went on for much longer than from the night before, and the two young teens finally broke apart, flushed, sweaty, gasping for air.

Mike looked into El's wide innocent eyes as she ruffled his shaggy mop of hair, belatedly realizing his hands had crept under the old baggy sweater she loved to wear. She didn't seem to mind. They cuddled for a while longer, hands roaming over each other randomly.

"So I guess this means you're my girlfriend now. And I'm your boyfriend." His forehead touched hers tenderly as they kept gazing into each other's eyes.

El had watched a ton of cheesy soap operas over the past year, and Mike's mention of the word *boyfriend* made her feel all special and tingly. "Oh, like how it is on TV?" she asked. Her expression grew thoughtful. "Or maybe... like... Aunt Joyce and Dad?"

Mike hadn't even considered that. He knew that both Will's mom and Hopper had dealt with a lot of horrible unexplainable things over the past year which had brought them crashing back into each others' lives, and fate only knew what could unfold from there. He did know, though, that they both deserved to be happy like everyone else. Like him and El.

"Umm, maybe? That's gonna be something for them to figure out together." He touched El's face tenderly, brushing a stray curl back behind her ear. "This is *us*. You and me. Eleven and Mike. Mage and Paladin. And we need to figure *ourselves* out together."

El thought about that for a minute. "But what about Max? Doesn't she want to be your... girlfriend too?" Her chest tightened as she recalled the fateful day she'd finally run away from the cabin to find Mike, only to discover him and Max *together* in the school gymnasium.

Mike recoiled. "Madmax? Don't be silly El! She has... she has the hots for *Lucas*!" He snorted loudly. "**LUCAS**! Not me, no way. I only like Max as a friend anyway. Please, you gotta understand! *You* are the only one I love."

She considered that. "Okay. Maybe I should be nice to Max then."

"You should. I... I didn't like her at first either, but Max is alright, Will and Dustin and Lucas all say she is, and I shouldn't have been so mean to her," Mike replied. "So don't get angry and snap her neck or

anything, please! You'll break Lucas's heart," he added slyly.

"I think I nearly broke Lucas once already," she replied innocently. Mike giggled at the memory, then realized El was kissing him again. He slowly slid to a lying position on the couch while El remained astride him, their legs entwined. His hands ran through her curls, down her arched back to her soft bottom. He gave it a gentle squeeze, and felt her melt at his touch. El's fingers danced across his chest in response, tickling his ribcage and stomach. One of her hands finally came to rest on his crotch and he groaned, feeling her brush against it experimentally. That particular part of him had woken up a long time ago, and now it was *really* starting to make its presence felt.

El had noticed, too. She disentangled herself from Mike and grabbed his wrist. He began to protest, but she tugged it firmly. "Do you want to go to my bedroom?" she asked, biting her lip shyly. She'd seen that in the soap operas, too. *When a girl likes a boy very much, she always invites him to her bedroom.*

Mike's eyes grew very wide, and he excitedly let her lead him into her cosy little nook. El gestured with her free hand, the door slammed shut, she spun on her heels to face him and their lips met ferociously. They collapsed into a tangled heap on her bed, hands still roaming freely and wildly over each other. El let out a timid gasp as Mike slowly began to lift her sweater.

"Mike? Are we doing *sex*?" El whispered. Mike hesitated, not sure how to explain it and not even really sure where she'd learnt about sex, but she made him guide her sweater off and it fell to the floor along with her undershirt. She wasn't wearing a bra and didn't need one. His hands automatically reached for her budding breasts with their small, pink nipples. They were the first he'd ever seen, the first he'd ever touched, and he marvelled at how warm, supple and firm they were. El closed her eyes and her full lips slightly parted as Mike traced around and over each hardening nipple, enjoying her sweet moans.

A small part of his brain was telling himself he'd be *deader* than dead right now if Hopper knew that his adoptive daughter was currently topless and being fondled in her very own bed by a very aroused Mike Wheeler.

He hooked his fingers around El's lavender pajama bottoms, peeling them off her slender legs. She moved over him and began to undo the button on his jeans. "Aunt Joyce gave me a talk. Before the Snow Ball. She *knows* I love you. I think *everyone* knows..." She looked down at Mike and gave him one of her gorgeous dimple-faced smiles. "Sex is when two people love each other... *we* love each other. They want to make each other feel good. *I* want to make *you* feel good." The words came out in a jumble, but Mike understood. He saw El tilting her head fractionally and drew in a sharp breath as his belt buckle undid itself and the zipper on his fly moved of its own accord. His pants flew off with an audible *pop* of displaced air, and he felt painfully aware of the very obvious tent and giant wet spot in his briefs.

"El... don't tease," he groaned. Another tiny movement of El's head, and his own shirt had telekinetically pulled itself off and joined the growing pile of clothing on the floor. Now they were both down to only their socks and underwear. El's dimpled smile broadened and she sat up, now fully straddling him. Small fingers poked playfully at his belly button, disappeared under his straining waistband, and finally found his rock hard dick. El began to caress it gently without breaking eye contact with her astonished lover. She felt powerful, dominating, *free*.

"Oh my god... oh shit... Will's mom... *Mrs. Byers* told you how to do **THIS?**"

"No, silly!" She leaned close and whispered into his ear, "I found one of Will's pornos." Her hands succeeded in freeing Mike's cock of its captivity and she carefully started gliding her fingers along its length.

Mike sucked in his breath and rolled his eyes, partly at the squicky thought of Will Byers owning a secret stash of dirty magazines, but mostly in pleasure at El's touch. "Oh *shit*... El!" He nearly came all over her hand just then, but imagined a Demogorgon crashing through the window, imagined his mother walking in on them, imagined *Hopper* walking in on them, gritted his teeth and forced himself not to.

"Also, I've been stuck here in this cabin," she continued matter-of-factly. "For a long time, remember? Some things I just... figured out."

As if to prove her point, she slowly ground her crotch against Mike's legs and there was no mistaking the succulent heat flowing from the junction of her thighs. She looked down and examined the most private part of the boy she loved more than anything else in the entire world. She ran her soft hands up and down his throbbing engorged length, caressing the flared glans, flicking across the sensitive tip, marvelling at how it oozed precum at the slightest touch. She observed how it twitched and responded to her actions, and decided that she liked making him feel good. "It's nice," she whispered, making him squirm and blush fiercely at the compliment.

Mike watched her movements in awe, breathing heavily, one of Dustin's stupid sayings floating through his mind. *This is soooo totally tubular.* He propped himself into a seated position and reached hungrily for one of her petite breasts again. This time he gave into pure instinct and took a nipple into his mouth, sucking and licking tenderly, enjoying El's sweet moans and the feel of her soft flesh against his tongue. "El? Do you trust me? To make you feel good?"

El gave him a smoldering look and nodded. Then she pouted as he pushed her hands away from his cock momentarily, but allowed him to lift her gingerly off his lap. She bounced lightly onto the bed beside him, and watched silently as he got onto suddenly shaky knees, grabbing one of her pillows.

"Here. Lay down. I want... I want to try and make you feel good too."

She lay back with her head against the pillow and instinctively spread her legs open for him. Mike knelt beside her, letting out a self-conscious moan when her hand found his dick again, and pulled aside her sopping panties. He marvelled at what he saw. "Pretty..." he complimented her shyly. He didn't know what else to say. He didn't know girls could get so... *wet* down there. El's pussy was creamy and supple, her delicate lips opening tenderly like a flower at his touch. She blushed furiously and began inhaling sharply, exhaling in cute flustered whimpers as Mike experimentally ran his fingers up, down, and through her folds, over and around her tiny clit, over and over again. She gasped in pleasure when he finally slipped his fingers into her dripping core. She was so incredibly tight, so incredibly *warm*.

Lightning bolts shot straight from El's tingling loins to her brain as

she watched and felt Mike explore inside her for the first time. "Oh, Mike. Feels so much better when it's *you* doing it," she cried. It was true, she'd spent many lonely days and nights exploring herself on this very bed, her thoughts and desires focused only on the boy she loved and so desperately wanted to be reunited with. Reaching out through the Void. Wishing and hoping he would one day again be this close to her. And now here he was. Her hand subconsciously tightened its iron grip around his slippery cock, and suddenly Mike realized she'd just sent him over the edge, past the point of no return. His fingers tensed inside her and his balls churned as his aching cock prepared for release.

"Oh! *Shit!* **ELEVEN!** *Shit...* El, *fuuuu...*" Mike groaned loudly and his whole body shuddered as he shot what felt like the load of a lifetime all over El's hand, breasts and stomach.

El shrieked, then began giggling uncontrollably, still holding on to his twitching cock. Her free hand automatically went to her chest, attempting unsuccessfully to scoop up all of Mike's warm slimy goo and getting most of it smeared across her upper body instead. She focused on her sticky fingers in awe. "Oh... Aunt Joyce didn't tell me it was going to happen like *that*."

"Oh god, El!" he heaved. "Oh god, *oh god...*" He looked down at the complete and utter mess on El's body and unwrapped her hand from around his suddenly oversensitive dick. *At least it didn't go all over my underwear... or all over her panties... or on her bed... oh god, oh god.*

She looked at him dreamily, and Mike instantly felt like he owed her after that. He bent down and took a nipple into his mouth, not caring that she was still covered in his cum, flicking his tongue across the sensitive pink nub as he increased his gentle stimulation of her superheated nether regions. El propped herself up on her elbows and arched her back in ecstasy. Her thighs clamped down on his hand like a vise.

"Oh, *Mike!* Oh! **MIKE!** *MIIIIIKE!*" El felt her sopping pussy contract and pulse rhythmically around Mike's fingers, and she willed him to keep going, knowing that she was close. She clutched the sheets and hissed through clenched teeth when his thumb found her clit and started rubbing circles around it, faster and faster. His hand and

tongue were all over her erect nipples and they ached with an insane pleasure she couldn't describe. Finally with a series of writhing, shuddering movements she screamed his name one last time and collapsed limply onto the bed, uttering an intensely powerful cry that threatened to shatter their very souls and the environment around them.

Mike could swear the entire cabin and about ten square miles of forest had just vaporized themselves into oblivion, but once the echoes of El's psychic scream had faded from his mind he could see the walls around them were still standing.

Carefully, protectively, he wiped away the red streak from her nostril, another from her ear, and kissed the tip of her nose tenderly.

El's eyes fluttered open at long last, focusing on Mike. "Aunt Joyce didn't... didn't tell me it was going to happen like *that*, either," she panted weakly. Her cheeks and upper body were heavily flushed a cute shade of crimson, making her look even more beautiful, if that were even possible.

For a long time, they just lay there together on El's bed, holding tightly onto each other, their breathing and heartbeats slowly returning to normal. El rested her head in the crook of Mike's neck and snuggled against him contentedly. He bowed his head, gently resting his chin amongst her unruly curls. He could smell the fresh scent of her vanilla-strawberry shampoo mixed with the musky tang of their sweaty, sticky flesh and bodily fluids.

"Hopper's gonna be back soon," he mumbled after a while.

El stirred but made no effort to move.

"He's gonna kill us both if he catches us like this," Mike persisted teasingly.

El turned to look at him. Mike could see the reluctance tinged with sadness in her warm brown eyes as the afterglow slowly began to fade and reality seeped back in. "Mike? I... I wish we could stay like this. Forever," she whispered.

"Me too El," Mike whispered back. "But there's a big wide world out there we gotta face. A *real life* for you. Our friends. Parents. School. Hopes. Dreams. *The future*. All that sort of stuff. We'll be able to face it together."

El's body went rigid, and she stayed silent for a while, mulling over Hopper's three rules in her head. "Dad... Hopper... he says I can't... *can't* go out into the world yet. Still have to hide. *Away* from everyone," she finally sniffled.

Mike was taken aback. "He can't do that forever. You're his daughter now. His real *official* daughter." His eyes were full of concern as they gazed back into hers, and his voice grew stronger, more determined. "No. **No way.** I'll make him see reason, I *promise*."

El's heart leapt. *It means something that you can't break. Ever.* "Promise?"

Mike smiled. "El, I promise. Hop may be an asshole sometimes, but he's not stupid. He loves you too, you know."

"I know."

"We should really get up."

"Stay with me... for today?" She caressed Mike's face lightly, tracing imaginary lines between the smattering of freckles that dotted his cheeks and nose. *Pretty.*

Mike purred at her touch. "Of course I'll stay with you El. But not just for today. *For the rest of our lives.*" He hugged El tighter, blinking away sudden tears of his own, felt her melt into his arms once more. Neither of them had any more words, so they lay there for a while longer in contemplative silence until the room grew too cold to withstand.

"Bath? Together?" she finally asked.

When Hopper returned just after lunch with Jonathan and Nancy, he found El and Mike wrapped up together in one of his big scratchy blankets, watching another one of El's endless soap operas. The fire

had burnt itself down to a dull ashen glow, and it was absolutely freezing in the old cabin.

"Jesus, it's cold in here!" Nancy exclaimed. She set the takeout pizzas she'd been carrying down on the dining table and went to grab another couple of logs for the woodburner.

"Sorry, we must have gotten too wrapped up watching TV to notice," Mike quipped.

Hopper pursed his lips, an annoyed look creeping onto his face as he studied the younger Wheeler kid, wondering whether or not he had anything to hide. "Yeah. Great. So I take it there was no trouble then?"

"No trouble at all," Mike countered. El looked at her adoptive father and nodded in agreement.

"Great," Hopper said again. "Fine. Okay, have some grub and then you two can help Nancy start getting things ready in here for the new curtains." He turned away and prepared to head back outside-

"Dad? Mike is my boyfriend now!" announced El cheerfully.

[said in a Han Solo voice] *Sorry about the smut.*

3. Second Chance

This was originally the 'second half' of what ended up becoming Chapter 2, which was meant to act as the first logical part of the entire story before I decided to make the timeline skip around a bit and moved the D&D chapter to become the first.

Compared to the smutty 'first half' of Chapter 2, there's no smut in this half at all really, not to mention a *massive* change in mood and tone, which made the decision to carve off on its own much easier. It's more a standalone Hopper/Mileven segue.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 16, 1984
Second Chance

*So let's talk
Talk all night long
But this time
Say what should be said
And I know it's hard
But this is for the best
- Let's Talk, Timecop1983*

Mike had seen Hopper lose his shit before, but never like *this*.

Jonathan and Nancy had scurried back outside with one of the pizzas, uttering some lame excuse about how it was warmer in the Blazer. Leaving one *very* angry chief of police behind in the glacially cold cabin with two cowering thirteen year olds.

Mike started forward and opened his mouth to say something, but Eleven clutched his arm and held him back.

Hopper lit a cigarette, and paced back and forth in the cabin like a massive thundercloud, brooding, head pounding, not wanting to say anything lest his brain burst from all of the sudden stress. The chilly silence stretched out for minutes until it became almost intolerable.

Suddenly, Hopper whirled around. "**Boyfriend. Girlfriend.**" He ground out the words between tightly clenched teeth as if they were curses. "**You. Are. Both. Thirteen.** Do you even *know* what those *words* mean?" He whirled round again and stomped back to the far side of the cabin. He couldn't bear to look his daughter nor the Wheeler kid in the face right now.

"I *know* those are the *words* you and Aunt Joyce want to call each other!" Eleven spat defiantly. Hopper's face got even redder, and he sank down onto one of the dining room chairs with a massive sigh, and held his head in his hands.

"It's... it's not like that at all," Hopper finally said, seemingly caught off guard. Then a bit of his old fire returned. "But that's *not* the point! The point is you are **NOT** yet old enough to know what those words signify. You are **NOT** yet ready for the *responsibility*, the *anguish*, the *distractions*, the *temptations* that come with that... that sort of *commitment*! This... this... it's just *puppy love*!" he snapped, banging a fist on the dining table to emphasize his words.

"Chief. Sir. You know Eleven and I waited so long to see each other again. It hurt us both to be apart for *so long*! You kept her locked up in *this* scungy old place for 353 days! If it was puppy love, and it's **NOT**, we would have gotten over each other after the first week she went missing," Mike yelled accusingly.

"Oh yeah? Maybe I *should* have kept her locked up here longer, if I'd known *this* would be the outcome!" He was on his feet, pacing heavily again. It took all of his self control not to wrench open the door to his booze stash, grab a bottle of tequila, and drink himself into oblivion.

"Now you're just being irrational! You *saw* what happened a month ago! You were *right there*!" Mike retorted. "You're *not* stupid. You can see things could have turned out way different."

Hopper finally looked up and shot a piercing glance at Mike. "The possibilities run through my mind far deeper than you could ever imagine, Wheeler," he said in a soft, dangerous tone, and resumed pacing.

"Hop. *Please*, listen. El *wants* a normal life. *Needs* a normal life. We've

been given the chance. The Gate is closed, Will is cured, the bad men are *gone*, aren't they?" Mike sounded like he was on the verge of tears now. "El's managed to find happiness with *us*. Our *friends*. With *me*. With *you* even, god damn it. Can't you see?"

"Dad?"

Hopper still couldn't bear to look his daughter in the face. Instead he remained standing in the kitchen with his back to the teenagers, head in hands, rubbing his temples furiously to calm himself down.

"*Why* did you take me in last winter?"

He could hear Mike sniffing quietly behind him.

"*Why* did you *adopt* me?"

He squeezed his eyes shut and bit down on his lip so hard he tasted metal.

"*Why* did you let me go to the Snow Ball?"

He slammed his fist against the cupboard door.

"*Why* did you do all that... if all you wanted to do is keep me locked up... *like Papa*?" El's voice broke.

He silently choked back tears of his own.

"*Why* did you do all that... *if you wanted to keep me and Mike away from each other*?" she sobbed.

"She's going to have to grow up and grow old sometime, sir," Mike said quietly, his own voice thick with emotion. "You may as well let her start now, with people she trusts. People she *loves*."

Deep down in his heart, Hopper knew the kids had checkmated him. It was true, he hadn't really thought things through all that rationally. The moment Owens had handed him that vital slip of paper, he should have eased off on the hiding, the secrecy, the paranoia, and should have started preparing El for her eventual introduction back into the wider world. But no, he'd been too caught

up in his own selfish fears and his own selfish desires that he'd never considered for a moment what he was subjecting his daughter to. A gilded cage was still a cage.

He finally broke, and turned to face the pair. Mike was gently wiping the tears from El's eyes, holding her tightly and consoling her. His eyes met Hopper's. They were puffy and red but still brimmed with defiance. In that moment Hopper knew Mike Wheeler understood his daughter better than he ever would.

Hopper heaved himself back into his chair. For a long time he didn't speak, but stared at the surface of the old dining table.

"Sara," he finally choked out, unable to stop the emotions now.

"Dad? Sara. I remember. You gave me her pretty hairband to wear." El held up her hand, mostly for Mike's benefit.

"Sara," he repeated. "My first daughter. She... she *went away* when she was seven, Wheeler. She... *died*, I didn't want to lose her... but I did." He rocked back and forth in his chair like a madman and let out a quiet sob. "I... I thought... damn it, *I thought I could save her*."

Mike was taken aback by the emotions the usually stoic chief of police was showing right now. "Hopper," he offered quietly. "You've got your second chance." He hugged El even tighter. "With El."

"You saved Will too," El pointed out quietly. "From the Upside Down. *You did so good*." She repeated the words Hopper had said to her, seconds after closing the Gate.

"Do you see our point now, sir? Do you see why we're ready to make that commitment to each other?" Mike ran out of air, or words, and stopped.

Hopper looked down at the table again. His ring finger twitched reflexively. He knew he'd lost so much more than Sara that day, a part of him had died too. But as had just been pointed out to him, sometimes you get given a second chance. Better for El to grow up and grow old with this Wheeler kid, who seemed to actually genuinely care for her, than some schmuck that would just break her

heart and her spirit all over again. He knew *himself* at age thirteen had never possessed the same hidden maturity nor fierce determination that these two standing before him seemed to. He also knew that deep down, the pair were destined for each other. But damn it, why couldn't they have been a *teeny* bit older and a *teeny* bit more exposed to the world before diving headfirst into the oh-so-very deep end? He closed his eyes and braced himself.

"Look, alright. I... I didn't think I would be having this talk with you right now. Maybe in a couple of years. Actually hoped never."

"Dad. I. LOVE. MIKE." El practically screamed. The doors to all of the rooms slammed shut and blood trickled out her nose. Mike wrapped his arms around her protectively from behind, noticed Hopper eyeing him and started to blush.

Hop hadn't even thought about what raising a moody, telekinetic teenage daughter would entail, but he knew that he was already finding out. He held up his hands in mock surrender and continued, "Please El, don't take it the wrong way. The talk is happening right now. I should have handled it better. I don't understand this bond you have between each other, and I don't think I ever will beyond what a normal parent" - he paused and blinked away tears - "has with their daughter or son. But if you **do** love Mike, and he loves you, I guess I *can't* stand between you two forever."

El took what felt like the first clean breath she'd had in ages.

Mike blinked, his spirits finally lifting. "Th-thank you, Hopper. Sir."

Hopper gestured. "And you're right too. About this life. We're going to have to work out how to get you back into the world for good, El. We'll probably have to set some new boundaries. Some new rules. Remember, El, *C-O-M-promise*? Halfway happy?"

"Halfway happy," she repeated quietly.

Mike spun El around, and lifted her face to his, their lips touching tenderly in a kiss that would go on for a good long while, hands roaming hungrily over each other in a manner that would make old maids blush.

Hopper averted his eyes with a grimace, and tried his hardest not to think about grabbing his shotgun and chasing Wheeler out of the cabin. *Oh shit, what have I gotten myself into?* "Are you done?" he finally asked.

"Uhh, yeah, I guess," Mike replied.

Hopper looked between the two teens. El finally had a smile on her lips. She looked positively radiant. Mike had the same old goofy look he always did, but he too seemed to have picked up a new confidence.

"Come here. Please. Both of you." Hopper stood up and opened his arms wide, and the three of them came together in a gigantic, crushing bear hug. It lasted almost as long as Mike and El's kiss had.

"Now you two better eat your pizza, it's getting cold. And Wheeler? Please don't do anything stupid." Hopper murmured softly.

This was pretty intense to write. Hopefully it's not too dark for y'all.

The next chapter will be much lighter (and smuttier).

4. Fooling Around

More smut ahead. Foot fetish content warning, for anyone squeamish. And a bit of IMPLIED JOPPER.

I really like how a lot of the secondary characters in this series have such colorfully fleshed out personalities (for fictional characters), it makes them a real pleasure to write... Karen Wheeler being the prime example here.

Also, poor Will never seems to catch a break.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 2, 1985

Fooling Around

*If she should come a-calling
I wouldn't dream of turning her away
And if it got hot and hectic
I know she'd be electric
I'd let her take her chances with me*
- **Heart and Soul**, Huey Lewis and the News

Eleven leaned patiently against the breakfast bar in the Wheelers' kitchen, elbows resting on the cool surface. She balanced her chin delicately in her hands and watched Mike as he pottered around busily fixing them a snack. "Mike?" she asked. "Are the others mad at me?"

"About what, El?" he called, his head currently buried in the depths of their fridge.

"About earlier," she answered. "With the dice."

Mike closed the fridge door, turned around and gave her a reassuring smile. "No way, El! Don't worry about it. I could see Max was about to lose her shit at the lack of progress too. It was the perfect distraction we needed." He grabbed a couple of plates, set them on

the counter in front of El along with the jug of maple syrup and stick of butter he'd retrieved, then continued, "Dustin *always* makes his boss baddies too overpowered and we were getting thrashed anyway. He's becoming a better Dungeon Master though."

"As good as you?"

Mike grinned. "One day. He's been planning campaigns for a while now, and always begs us to play them. For me, it's nice to take a break from being Dungeon Master once in a while." The toaster finally popped, and he made a grab for its contents. He carefully set a piping hot Eggo down on each plate and slid one across the counter to El.

El beamed. "Thanks Mike. Love you."

"You're welcome. Love *you* more." Mike leaned towards El across the breakfast bar, and their lips met in a passionate kiss that went on a bit longer than anticipated.

From off to the side there was the unmistakeable sound of a camera shutter going off, which made both teens jump and pull away from each other in surprise. Mike turned towards the source of the offending sound, and his eyes widened in surprise followed by embarrassment. "**MOOOOM!**"

Karen Wheeler had appeared in the archway between the kitchen and study nook, brandishing her omnipresent instant camera like it was some kind of weapon. At her side, Mike's baby sister Holly stood quietly with thumb in mouth, looking up at Eleven through eyes as wide as saucers.

"I'm sorry Mike, but when I noticed you and Jane kissing cutely over the counter I just *had* to sneak off and grab the camera for posterity!" she gushed proudly. "My son and his first love, this is just so exciting! Jane, you look very pretty today. I can see why Mike's smitten with you. Oh loosen up Mike, it's not like I caught you two doing anything *naughty*."

Mike made a quiet sickening gurgle in the back of his throat. El blushed and hid a smile behind her hand. They both could guess

what the other was thinking.

"Thank you Mrs. Wheeler," El said. Holly was still staring wondrously at her, and she bent down to give the little girl a small wave.

"*Mom!* You were never this interested a few years ago when you found out Nancy had started dating!" Mike blubbered.

His mother looked taken aback as she pulled the slowly developing Polaroid out of the camera and set both items down on the counter. "Oh, Mike. That's because Nancy was always sneaking around and treating the whole exercise like it was some sort of secret mission. You on the other hand are being *such* a gentleman! It's hard not to feel a sense of pride! It was also very nice of you to get Chief Hopper to speak to us the other week about your feelings for each other."

El shot a quick fearful look at Mike. Her eyes said, *Hopper spoke to them?* Mike flinched. *I'll tell you later*, he mouthed.

Karen turned to El, oblivious to the teens' secret conversation. "You know, I didn't think much of your father at first, Jane. He'd always been married to his job, not much empathy, very distant. Typical tough big city cop. When poor Will first disappeared, we... oh, but that doesn't matter now. I'm just glad I was wrong about him. You've done good for him by coming back into his life. And for Mike too." She smiled warmly and indicated the now fully developed Polaroid. "Aww, don't you two just look so *cute*?"

El picked it up. "It is a pretty photo. Can I keep it?" She had the perfect place for it too, above her dresser back at the cabin.

"Of course you can!" Mrs. Wheeler agreed cheerfully. "Oh, I'd better let you two have your snack before it gets cold. I'll be watching TV with Holly if you need me. It's starting to really blow a gale out there, hopefully the others get home safely tonight. I'll see you both at dinner later on."

Mike and El watched Karen leave with a bounce in her step, leading Holly back into the sitting room. "What the heck has gotten into her?" Mike muttered, mostly to himself rather than El. They grabbed their rapidly cooling waffles and started to head back downstairs.

Then Mike let out a startled yelp and stopped dead in his tracks, nearly causing El to collide with him. "MAX! You shit! Have you been watching us the whole time?"

The redhead girl grinned at them from the top of the basement steps. "Not the whole time, Wheeler. Lucas was watching you for the first five minutes, but he had to run to the bathroom to puke when you two started frenching each other."

"Gimme a break, Mayfield! You and Lucas probably kiss like that all the time, we all know he's not that innocent." Mike pushed his way past her and stomped down the stairs.

"Not innocent anymore, no," Max giggled as she followed him and El back into the basement. "Everything he learnt, he learnt from *me*."

Mike made a face. "Gross, Max! You're almost as bad as Byers with his porno collection."

Will spluttered at the mention of his name. "What?! You... How did... I don't know... *never*..."

Dustin leapt to his feet. "Hey. **HEY**. You told me those were *Jonathan's*!"

"Friends don't lie," El murmured, taking a bite of her Eggo. Will shot her a dirty look that said *I know it was you told Mike*. She smiled sweetly back at him.

"Come *on*. You expect me to believe a bunch of geeky small town boys don't know what a *porno* is?" A sly smile spread across Max's face. "Fine. Let's see how naive you country folk really are. Wanna play truth or dare?"

"What is 'truth or dare'?" El asked, feeling a bit lost. Mike sat down next to her and she melted against him. He began to explain the concept to her in a low voice, but was interrupted by the sound of the toilet flushing at the other end of the basement.

Lucas wandered back out, flicking water from his fingers. "Someone say truth or dare? I'm totally in."

"Check out *Captain Whipped* here, instantly agreeing with his girlfriend," Dustin made a convincing whip cracking noise with his mouth. "Fine, I'm in too."

Lucas glared at Dustin and opened his mouth to make a scathing reply, but Mike looked up and cut him off sharply. "*Dude*. C'mon, that ain't cool," He didn't like the way this conversation was heading, and even El was starting to look a bit uncomfortable. "I really don't think this is the sort of game we should be trying to drop El into straightaway."

"Don't sweat it, Mike. Truth or dare is pretty tame if you don't play with a juicy forfeit rule in place," Will piped up.

"Oh, I can make it juicy alright," Max cackled in an evil tone, and walked over to her backpack. She pulled out a quarter-full bottle of dark amber liquid and held it up for inspection. "Bourbon, anyone? Or are you small town boys gonna claim you don't know what *booze* is, either?"

"Ohhh no. Ohhh *no no NO*," Mike held up his hands in genuine horror. "Max, that is **DEFINITELY** not a good idea. Not in *my* house anyway. We'll never be allowed to hang out together ever again if any of the adults, or god forbid, *Hopper* catches us!"

"Fine then pansies," Max returned the bottle of bourbon to her backpack. "Here's the deal, next time my parents head to Chicago for the weekend, we all go to my house and play it. My asshole stepbrother still won't be back from California by then, so we'll have the place to ourselves."

"Bring it on, Madmax!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Could be fun?" El mused. Mike stared at her in alarm. She returned his gaze evenly. *Oh loosen up Mike!* her expression read.

Mercifully, a knock on the door put an end to the escalating tension. "Kids?" Karen poked her head into the basement. She looked a bit frazzled. "Mrs. Sinclair just called to say a weather warning's been announced. There's a big dump of snow heading this way. I'm sorry but we're going to have to pack you all off home now before it

becomes too dangerous and too cold to go anywhere. Chief Hopper will be here soon to collect you all." There was a chorus of groans from around the room, the others stood up and began gathering their belongings.

As if on cue, Mike's Supercom crackled to life. "Wheeler? El? This is Hopper, anyone there? Over."

Mike grabbed it off the table and pressed Transmit. "Go ahead, Chief. Over."

"Yeah, there's a pretty big snowstorm coming," the reply came back. "I'm about five minutes from your house now. Can bundle everyone into the truck and get 'em all safely home before it hits. Over."

"Copy that," Mike said. "Mom just told us the same thing, over."

"Alright, tell your friends to hustle, I'll be there soon to round them up. El can still stay with you as promised. The cabin's going to be treacherous overnight." Hopper hesitated, then pressed on. "I won't be heading back there. I'll be at the Byerses if you need to get hold of me. Don't do anything stupid, Wheeler. Over and out."

Will's face grew very red.

"I KNEW IT!" Dustin yelled. "Hopper and Will's mom, *up a tree...*" He guffawed loudly.

Hopper's voice emanated from the speaker one last time. "If Henderson happens to be laughing right now, somebody *please* give him a dead arm for me. Over and out again."

Outside the wind shrieked and snow had begun to fall. It had just gone 3pm but the sky was already dark on account of the fast approaching storm.

Mike finally turned away from his bedroom window. "Holy shit, that was close. I really thought Dustin and Lucas would start punching each other for real."

"Yes, they like to annoy each other," Eleven agreed. She put down the

object she'd been examining on Mike's desk. "Mike? Truth or dare. It sounds *fun*."

"Yeah, well, it can be. But also really embarrassing." Mike flopped onto his bed, and idly stared up at the ceiling. A moment later El slipped into bed next to him and draped her arm gently across his torso. Mike turned to face her and smiled, grateful they could finally have some private time to spend together. "Oh, Eleven. I just don't think the others will go easy on you the moment you start playing that game."

"*Bring it on, Madmax!*" El replied mock-defiantly, parroting Dustin's words from earlier.

"They'll probably ask a thousand dumb questions about you and me. What we do when we're together. What we do when we're alone. Hah." Mike brought a hand to El's face and tweaked the tip of her nose cutely. "You won't want to pick dare either. They'll dare us to do *unspeakable* things, probably."

El said nothing more. She traced lazy circles on Mike's chest with a finger and listened to the wind howling outside.

"Mike? What did your mom mean? Dad... Hopper... spoke to her? And your dad too?" she finally asked, changing the subject. On Christmas day Hopper and Aunt Joyce had sat her down for a very sober talk about 'integrating back into the real world', or so they'd called it. Hop told her that if anyone ever asked, Aunt Becky had secretly come to see him about adopting El officially. *You can tell them Mama got really sick and couldn't look after you anymore. You never knew I was your father.* Aunt Joyce mentioned that most of the other adults and kids she'd meet along the way would call her Jane, but she would always still be Eleven to her friends if she chose. *It's really important that you stick to this story, El*, Hopper had advised her. *Think of it as **our new rule number one**, okay?* El agreed without hesitation, excited for her new-found freedom, knowing it would make things easier, and that her relationship with Mike could continue to blossom because of it. But deep down she still felt some quiet dread at having to keep up the ruse, especially not knowing how other people were going to react.

Mike propped himself up on an elbow and gazed at her evenly. "Y-yeah, he did. It's... it's all part of the plan to get you out in the world, El. Please don't worry. Hop made sure my parents don't know more than they absolutely have to. And he told me you would be able to help keep our cover story solid. It's mostly true, anyway! The main thing is *everyone's* glad that you and I are together. You saw how goofy my mom was earlier!"

El ducked her head. "I... don't want your parents to think I'm a *weirdo!*" she whispered doubtfully.

"El! **Stop!** They *don't!* If anything, *I'm* the weirdo, not you. You're... you're beautiful and I love you," he sighed.

"Love *you* more," El purred back. Then their lips and hands and legs found each other once more. Neither of them could even remember standing up, but suddenly they were both back on their feet next to the bed, still entangled together, panting and moaning noisily. Mike playfully grabbed for the buttons of El's checkered flannel top and undid them one by one while she clutched at the hem of his stripey polo with a wicked grin. It was awkward, but somehow they managed to get each other's tops off simultaneously. Well... almost. El giggled as she struggled to lift Mike's polo past his head. "Big head!" she teased as he squirmed around clumsily. But soon they were both topless and both very aroused.

"Naked?" El asked, almost inaudibly. She grabbed Mike's hands, hooked them around the waistband of her jeans, kept them there, daring him to make the next move. El was blushing so hard the skin on her neck and chest was flushed a deep shade of red. She bit her lip and kept staring at him, her eyes large and shining.

Mike's mind flashed back just over a year to the basement of this very house, he and his friends yelling in horror and disbelief as Eleven had nonchalantly started to disrobe with all three of them present. *She tried to get naked!* Dustin had exclaimed. That was the night they'd met. And now here she was, standing timidly in front of him, hesitant, almost afraid to keep going. Somewhere along the way, she'd picked up the virtue of modesty. Along with other things. He marvelled at how much she'd matured as a person, how much she was trying her hardest to be normal again.

His smile turned brittle as he kept remembering. *There's something seriously wrong with her*, Lucas had said next. *Like, wrong in the head.*

"Oh, El," he whispered to her. "We... we don't have to go any further if... you're not comfortable with all this."

Again, it was as though El's mind was in sync with his. "I... I was a different person a year ago, Mike. The lab is gone now. Bad men are gone now. The gate is closed. Things don't feel wrong anymore. I don't have to feel fear anymore. I've learnt so much. I have friends. I have a real dad. I have *you*. I *love* you." She applied a tiny bit of pressure to his hands. "I want you."

El ducked her head self-consciously as Mike slid her jeans and panties off. She stepped out of them gingerly as they fell in a crumpled heap around her ankles, and they both looked at each other again. Mike drank in El's fully nude form and his heart caught in his throat. She was so beautiful, so perfect, standing there shyly in nothing but her wooly pink socks. They kissed again passionately as she fumbled with his jeans and briefs next, needfully pulling them off his body. He shrugged them off unceremoniously as they both came back up for air, panting, each of them grabbing a lungful before diving into each other's mouths again. El pushed him gently and they both fell backwards onto the bed again with a satisfied thump. The feel of their warm bare flesh against each other was electrifying.

Finally they had to come up for air again, and broke apart. Mike ran his hands delicately across El's blossoming chest and stomach, down her bare legs. "Your socks are really cute," he murmured, scooting himself around El and lifting her legs into his lap.

El giggled and sat up. "Aunt Joyce gave them to me for Christmas. Said it was time I started getting real clothes of my own." Her smile grew sad, then determined. "One day when things are better, Nancy and Aunt Joyce promised to take me shopping. *No more* sneaking around. I can't wait." She wiggled her toes playfully. "You can take them off if you like?"

Mike hooked a finger around one sock, rolling it down past her ankle, over her heel, and then completely off. He did the same with the other one. El's bare feet were soft, pink, and so warm. Each toe was a

study in perfection.

"El, I love every part of you right down to your cute little toes," he nervously proclaimed. The way he said it, all honest and sincere, made her feel warm and tingly. She couldn't help but snicker at the serious expression on his face though.

"Mike, they're just... *feet*," she giggled again.

"They're *your* feet though. Perfect just like the rest of you." Mike was overcome by a sudden, inexplicable urge just then, and he took one of her feet apprehensively in his hands and kissed the tip of each toe, one by one. El squealed reflexively but didn't pull away from him. Instead she kept looking into his eyes. The rational part of him started screaming, *if Hopper catches you sucking his daughter's toes...* but it made him bolder, and suddenly his tongue was running wetly all over her soles, licking and tasting. El burst into laughter at the strange new feeling, and playfully rubbed her feet all over Mike's face. Then he gently grabbed them, and guided them down to his cock.

El's eyes grew wide as she realized what it was he wanted her to do. He groaned in pleasure as she gave him another of her gorgeous dimple-faced smiles and rubbed her slippery soles up and down his shaft. She watched Mike's face and decided after a moment that she liked doing it to him. It made her feel naughty and dominating all at once.

"Mike, this is *sooo* many kinds of weird," she murmured. On pure instinct she held his throbbing cock in the arch of one foot, and used the toes of her other foot to massage his tip.

"*Shit*, El, don't stop..." He sucked in a breath and glanced down. There was something very erotic about the way his cock was trapped between the soles of her feet right then. "It feels... amazing, ohhh..."

To be honest, El had never thought of her feet as anything special before and it made her a teeny bit self-conscious. She'd spent a lot of time barefoot while in captivity, but that was about it. *Captivity. The lab. The endless horrific experiments.* Her dreamy expression and her movements faltered just a bit, but then she set her thoughts firmly.

No, the bad men are gone now. Aren't they?

Mike had noticed. "What's wrong?" he asked in a concerned tone. He gently set her feet back on the bed and bent to give the tops of her toes a quick kiss.

"Remembering the bad men," she said quietly, hugging her knees to keep the dark thoughts at bay. "Oh, Mike. I'm glad I get to stay with you tonight. But promise you won't ever leave me." She pulled him into position next to her and kissed him again as he promised over and over that he would never do that. Up until this point they'd only spent a precious few nights together, but during those long nights El had found herself having fewer nightmares, and would sleep through until morning came. Even Hopper had noticed the difference, and gruffly teased that maybe he should have Wheeler over more often so he could get a bit more sleep himself. Every night her father would come running into her room to comfort and hold her whenever the nightmares came. She loved Hopper for that if nothing else.

El finally broke the kiss and crawled herself slowly down Mike's naked body. Now it was his turn to feel self-conscious, as she studied his throbbing member up close. There was no mistaking the desire in her eyes though, as they flicked back and forth between Mike and little Mike. A naughty glint came into her eyes when she wrapped her hand around it, remembering what had happened the last time she'd played with it. Then an idea formed in her mind and she moved her hand away, sharply tilting her head in one sudden motion. Mike sucked in a breath as his cock twitched sharply from her psychic manipulation. Then lightning bolts started arcing from his dick straight to his brain. It felt so damn good, but he reached out and grasped El's shoulder. "El, *please*... you don't have to use your powers on me..."

"You don't like it?" A trickle of blood seeped from El's nose, but she released her mind's grip on him.

"Well, it's not... it's not that," Mike stumbled. How could he explain it logically to his telekinetic girlfriend? He decided to take the honest approach and drew her closer to him, wiping her nose delicately. "I, El, uhh... you see, sex is not only about making the other person feel good. At the same time it needs to feel good for *you* too." He

hesitated, then settled a hand between her burning thighs. El moaned loudly at his touch. "See, I make you feel good by doing this, and at the same time, touching you makes me feel good." He moved his index finger mischievously into the cleft at the top of her mound, right where her tight pussy lips met. "I feel your soft skin against mine, I see your reaction. I know it's the right thing to do. That's what makes it enjoyable for both of us."

She closed her eyes, lips parting in pleasure, and nodded. "Mike... *uuhhh*... don't stop..."

"El, I would still love you even if you didn't have your powers. Using your powers to make *me* feel good, well, that's not making *you* feel good. I've seen how it drains the life out of you, I *can't* bear to see you like that." It wasn't a perfect explanation of course, but he needed her to understand.

Eleven's eyes fluttered open again, and Mike knew he'd gotten through to her. "So I make you feel good with my hands?"

"Any part of you, as long as you also enjoy doing it," he repeated tenderly.

"And mouth? And... *feet*?" she added innocently, but with a playful note in her voice, remembering his lewd act with her feet moments earlier. Mike shivered in pleasure at the fresh mental images it conjured up. There was also another way, he knew, but perhaps they weren't quite ready for that yet. He groaned inwardly at the thought of Mrs. Byers having to explain it to El sometime.

"Could you... use your mouth on me again?" El asked timidly, another blush creeping onto her lovely innocent face. "This time... *down there*?"

Mike blinked and froze, totally not believing he was hearing what he thought he was hearing.

"Will's magazine... they... *I saw a photo*. The man, he..." she stammered bashfully. "With his mouth." Her slim legs drew up and parted reflexively, fingers spreading her sopping wet core open for him.

Wordlessly the horny boy knelt between his girlfriend's splayed legs, desire burning in his brain like never before. *Damn Byers, leaving his dirty magazines lying around to corrupt my pure, innocent El...* Her musky scent enveloped his nostrils, and he shuddered from the thrill of being so close to El's most intimate part. He reached out to stroke her delicately parted lips, then leaned his face towards her pussy awkwardly, trying not to think about Demogorgons.

El let out a long, low sob of pleasure as she felt Mike's mouth close around her labia, nibbling, licking and sucking for all he was worth. *How could an act so naughty feel so damn good?* This was a thousand times more sensual, more enjoyable than when he'd done her with his fingers. She swore that she could see sparks every time his tongue touched her clit.

Mike pushed her legs open even wider and buried his face between them. Her breathing grew more ragged and desperate, and her hands clutched his head, pulling and teasing his hair. He kept up his ministrations for a long while, relishing in El's passionate cries, impulsively adding his fingers back into the mix since he already knew that she loved it when he did that.

"**MIKE!** Aaarghhh! *Hnnnnnn...*" El screamed and arched her back in one convulsing heave, thighs squeezing together and threatening to crush Mike's head by sheer force. She uttered one final wail, then collapsed back onto the bed and lay there weakly with her eyes closed. Tiny rivulets of blood streamed out of her nose and one ear, but her heavy breathing remained steady and the look on her face was one of utter pleasure. Mike pulled away from El's now deliciously engorged pussy and looked around his room. His trophies and trinkets, books and clothes had all jumped out of their rightful places and were now scattered in a wild jumble across the floor. *Shit, that's right. Telekinetic girlfriend.*

El's arm reached towards Mike's face and he allowed her to draw him close, pulling himself back into her yearning embrace. He collapsed next to her tiredly but thankfully, and once again their combined breathing grew softer and calmer as the wind howled outside and snow flurries lashed the window.

Eventually Mike realized that he really needed to pee, and his loins

still ached with a certain *other* kind of release too. Reluctantly he disentangled himself from El's warm clutch and drew the covers over her nude form, whispering a sweet apology when she protested at his departure. "I'll be right back, I promise." He quickly pulled his rumpled clothes back on then picked his way through the mess over to the bedroom door. He unlocked and opened it slowly, trying to be as quiet as possible. He glanced around the corridor, then froze solid, heart catching in his throat.

Nancy was leaning smugly against the wall outside, arms crossed, leering back at him with an expression that could only be described as *coprophagous*.

"Shit. **Shit**. Nancy, I... uhh..." Mike's head sagged and he wilted from sheer humiliation.

He'd completely forgotten she was home, and that her bedroom was right next door to his.

"Little brother," she groused sweetly, but with a delectably lecherous undertone. "Has anyone ever told you El is *quite* the screamer? It's a miracle the whole neighborhood didn't hear."

Squee.

As I was writing this chapter I came across an amazing fan-created floor plan of the Wheeler house, created by architect Boryana Ilieva. It made for an extremely handy visual reference when setting up the scene with El, Mike, and Karen (plus Max). Google it if you can.

I may have made a slight continuity goof with regards to Mike's parents. Seems I'd forgotten that right at the end of Season 1 Brenner pays them a visit, turns their house inside out and shows them a photo of Eleven. Let's just assume Karen totally doesn't recognize El one year later now that her hair's grown out a bit. Or maybe Hopper spun them a really really convincing yarn, who knows. The implications may be interesting if she ever starts to put two and two together :)

The next couple of chapters return to world-building but I promise they won't be too boring!

5. Talk Talk

Another entire section that I ended up carving off another chapter, because the mood whiplash threatened to kill the pacing.

Warning: smutty bit right at the end ties in with an oblique reference in a later chapter.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 2, 1985

Talk Talk

*It's just you, it's just me
The more things change the better we see
We do these things but do it again
We've got each other and fight to win
- It's Just You, Filter*

For a long moment the two Wheeler siblings stood in the hallway glaring at each other, not moving, not saying a word.

Mike finally broke the awkward silence with a curt shake of his head. "Whatever, Nancy. Stay out of my private life," he muttered. "Now excuse me, I *really* have to go pee."

Nancy stopped him with an outstretched arm. Her smug look had been replaced with one of slight worry. "Mike. *Listen*. I honestly don't care what you and El get up to behind closed doors, but I *do* care about *you* and about *her*, and only want to make sure you're both doing the right thing and playing it safe."

Mike opened his mouth to make another hot-headed retort, but then decided it wasn't worth the effort. "And what exactly do you mean by that?" he demanded instead.

"Look, just... go do whatever it was you were going to do, then we'll chat," Nancy replied. "I'll be here."

Mike stalked off to the bathroom, red-faced and still a little bit shaken. He finished up his business quickly, and briefly considered jerking off into the toilet to quell the fire in his loins, but decided it wasn't such a good idea with Nancy lurking around somewhere outside.

Nancy was still waiting by his door when he came back out of the bathroom. "Well?" he asked.

She turned and gestured him into her bedroom. "In there. Sit."

Mike flopped onto his sister's bed insolently. She walked into the room behind him and shut the door. "Okay, Mike. I know you and El are... *sleeping together*... in some way or another." She held up a firm hand as he opened his mouth to object. "No, *don't* deny it, I know *exactly* what it is I've been hearing from your bedroom the last half hour."

"So what are you going to do about it? Tell Hopper? Tell Mom and Dad?" Mike snorted. "The way they've been acting around me and El since Christmas, they're probably expecting *grandkids* from us by February. I'd rather take my chances with Hopper."

Nancy looked taken aback. "You little shit, there's no need to be so defensive!" she snapped. "I've already told you, that's *not the point*."

Mike glared at her again but didn't say anything more. The silence stretched out for a dozen more heartbeats, and grew brittle. Finally Nancy continued in a calmer tone, "The point is, the bond that you and El share? I can see it runs so deep and so pure that none of us will *ever* understand it. Only you two. The day at the cabin, after the Snow Ball? That was the day it first became obvious to me. For god's sake Mike, you made Chief Hopper cry! *Hopper*, of all people." She crossed the room and contemplated the view out her window, at the snow falling outside. "You must love each other very much to have stood up to him like that *and* made it out the other side still alive. I admire you for that, Mike. Eleven's become almost like another little sister to me, you know that?"

"We just tried to make him see reason. To let El have a *normal* life. That's all." Mike felt a small pang of regret at treating Nancy so

harshly. She clearly wanted the best outcome for him and El.

Nancy whirled around. "*Exactly*. And that is why *you* need to be doing the right thing, little brother. You've had *the talk*. You know where things inevitably lead when two people love each other to the point of oblivion. Me and Joyce have been discussing how to approach the subject with El." She plopped herself down on the bed next to her brother and continued, "Joyce explained enough to El so she could start freely making the right choices with you, but can't just steamroll her with all the information straight off the bat. El spent *years* locked up in that *fucking lab*, and she's still trying to get her head around a million other everyday things that you and I take for granted." She jabbed a finger into his chest. "So *you must not* take *her* for granted, or take advantage of her innocence."

The fury in Nancy's voice took Mike completely by surprise. "What are you even *saying*? I'm pretty sure *you* were up to far worse with boys when *you* were thirteen compared to me and El," he bit out. "So much for not caring what we get up to behind closed doors."

Nancy blushed and looked away. "Okay, so maybe I *do* care a little bit about what you get up to behind closed doors," she finally admitted. "What I'm saying is that you shouldn't force El into doing anything she's not ready for."

"Nancy, look, I'm not stupid and I'm *not* some braindead jock either," Mike replied in exasperation. "*I know* we aren't ready to go all the way yet."

All of the tension finally left Nancy's face, and she slumped in relief. "Oh, thank the stars. Maybe I should have just come out and asked you that right at the start."

"Yeah, maybe you should have," Mike mumbled, not quite accusingly. "Look, for what it's worth? El and me, we've talked about things to some extent. We both understand the limits of how far we can go right now. And if the whole neighborhood can hear us pushing those limits... well, too bad." He threw her a goofy smile.

Nancy studied her younger brother for a long while, again finding herself impressed by his quiet maturity and easy sense of humor.

Then she opened one of her dresser drawers, rummaged around momentarily, and finally grabbed something.

"Here, for when you *are* finally ready." Her hand met his.

Mike glanced down and studied the three little objects Nancy had pressed into his hand. Three squishy square foil packets with small round things in them.

"Don't be a dumbass and leave them where Mom can see," Nancy said with a grin. "She has a habit of going into-

"-our rooms without warning," Mike finished lightheartedly. He pursed his lips and took a careful breath. "Nancy? Sit down with El sometime. Get a feel for what she already knows, give her the guidance you think she needs. You might be surprised how far she's come in the last year since escaping from the lab."

Nancy smiled. "You know what, maybe I will. As long as you can bear to be without her for half a day or so?" She patted her brother's arm and stood up. "Anyway, I'm going downstairs to watch some TV, then help Mom start dinner. For the next hour, make all the damn noise you want."

El moaned quietly as Mike slipped back into bed beside her. She snuggled up to him and whispered enticingly, "Where did you go?"

"Bathroom," he whispered back truthfully, groaning as he felt her familiar touch between his legs. He was suddenly sort of glad he hadn't decided to jerk off in there after all.

El looked at him, then looked down and watched his stiffening cock as she played with it. Mike closed his eyes and shuddered.

"You... made me feel so *good*. So *happy* before," El murmured, her feather light motion on his cock finally bringing it to full attention. Then she pushed him gently onto his back, and slid herself gracefully down his body, hoisting herself onto her knees. "My turn now."

Mike's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he drew in a huge gulping breath as he felt an indescribably warm wetness engulf his

throbbing member. His hands grasped the sheets and his entire body writhed like it had just been electrocuted.

"Ahh! *SHIIT!*" he hissed in pure ecstasy. All he could hear was the sound of the blood rushing past his ears combined with El's greedy slurping. He opened his eyes and looked down, watching as his meat disappeared past El's pouty lips again and again. She had what could only be described as a wicked leer on her gorgeous face.

She mumbled something around his cock and he threw his head back again in pure ecstasy. "Wha... *wh...* gnnnhhh!" was all he managed to stutter in response.

El pursed her lips and withdrew Mike's dick from her mouth with a wet popping sound. "I said, do you like it?" she repeated innocently. Her curly hair fell about her face as she stuck out her pink tongue and lathered up his shaft slowly. Just like him, she'd had no experience doing this before, but somehow acting on instinct just seemed to be the right thing to do.

"*Hghhhff...*" he stammered, knowing he wasn't going to last much longer.

When it happened, it happened fast. The first spurt made El cough, but she kept bobbing her head on the end of his shaft. "Ummm... tastes funny," was all she managed to say between slurps. Her tongue snaked out again, cleaning him elegantly and thoroughly, like a satisfied cat.

Finally she pulled herself away, and slid back into position beside him on the bed. "Bit early for dessert," she teased, delicately wiping a stray rope of cum away from her lips.

Mike still couldn't bring himself to speak. He was fairly sure his synapses had all decided to rearrange themselves at random, firing nothing but pleasure into his cerebral cortex.

"*Holy shit,*" he finally managed to croak out.

"I heard Nancy's door open and close," El whispered saucily, her bangs falling cutely about her face as she propped herself up on an

elbow to face him. "Think she heard us?"

Older sisters can be such know-it-alls :)

6. Merry Christmas, Jane Hopper

Timeskip again! This time back one week to Christmas.

Another chapter with heavily implied Jopper. Apologies to all the fans who'd rather not see them together :)

The middle interlude takes place on Dec 20.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 25, 1984

Merry Christmas, Jane Hopper

*Outside my window
It's lonely and cold
Inside my heart there's a fire
Burning out of control
Burning for someone like you
- I Need You Tonight, ZZ Top*

The damn record player was skipping again. "*On the sixth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me... to me... to me... to me... to me...*"

Hopper looked up from the contents of the pot he was stirring on the stove, and hmphed to nobody in particular. "Stupid thing..." Giving the pot one final stir he gingerly placed the lid back on and made his way into the small living area of his cabin, noting that the door to El's bedroom had creaked open a notch. He gave the record player a gentle nudge, and the song resumed playing properly. "...*six geese-a-laying. Fiiiive golden rings...*" With a satisfied nod of his head, he returned to his place in front of the stove.

"Dad?" a tired voice called out. "So early. Why the loud music?"

"Why, it's Christmas morning, El! Nothing like a bit of *Bing and the Andrews Sisters* to start the festive day!" he answered.

El finally poked her head around the corner and glared at him.

Hopper glared back. "Good morning to you too," he quipped dryly.

She kept glaring at him, but curiosity eventually got the better of her. "What are they singing about?"

"Oh, just all the wonderful gifts they got from their *true loves*. Like partridges, dancing ladies, geese, that sort of thing," he replied. "Maybe Wheeler will get you some geese for Christmas, huh?"

El eyed Hopper closely. "Dad. Have you been drinking?"

"*What?* No! What makes you say that?"

"You're never this happy at six-three-zero am," she said bluntly. "Also, you're *cooking*."

Hop blinked. "C'mon, it's Christmas, El! I'm getting brunch ready for-" but El cut him off before he could even finish the sentence.

"Oh. *Aunt Joyce* is coming over. I get it." She stomped back into her bedroom and slammed the door, leaving a slightly gobsmailed Hopper standing in the kitchen.

"Teenagers," he muttered to himself, and went back to stirring his pot.

Eleven flopped onto her bed with a sigh, and buried her face into her pillow, close to tears. It had been nine whole days since she'd seen Mike. *Nine days!* Her patience was stretched nearly to breaking point. The delicious memories of being together with her boyfriend in this exact spot were forever etched into her mind and she hugged the pillow tighter, squeezed her tingling thighs together, wishing it was him, wishing she could turn back time and experience it all over again.

Nine days ago, after a particularly emotional exchange of words, Hopper had finally promised her and Mike he'd start making arrangements to allow them to start seeing each other and her friends regularly. To finally allow El to go out in the world. But the very next day he'd returned to work, and every night she'd wait for him to come home with good news, but the answer was always the same. *Please, El. Trust me, I'm still working on it.* The longer she waited, the

more lovesick and frustrated she got. Even worse, she knew things wouldn't work in her favor if she threw any tantrums. So she put on her best face, and tried her hardest to behave.

Her only solace had come in the form of a hastily scrawled note that Hopper had passed to her at the end of the fourth day. It was from Mike! Since then she'd pinned it above her dresser, next to the photo Jonathan had taken of them at the Snow Ball, and read it over and over to herself a thousand times, clinging to his words like they were a glimmer of hope. She'd even carefully penned a reply for Hopper to deliver to Mike, which he gladly did the next day, but that same evening he'd come home and told her they had to "*stop communicating for now, it's too risky.*" That had broken her heart even more.

Now as if things weren't bad enough, Aunt Joyce would be coming over today for Christmas brunch with Hopper, and no doubt they'd be fawning awkwardly over each other the entire time. Will was coming too of course, but as much as she loved his company he was still no substitute for her one and only Mike. For a moment she considered going into the Void to find him, but lately she'd even lacked the energy to do that. *Aunt Joyce and Hopper get to see each other, but not me and Mike.* "Not fair," she whimpered into her pillow, and the tears finally started flowing.

There was a knock at her door. Hopper had heard her loud sobbing from the kitchen. "Eleven? May I come in please?"

"No, *go away!*" she howled.

The door opened anyway and Hopper poked his head in. He looked concerned. "El? It's Christmas today, please don't cry. Christmas is meant to be the happiest time of the year."

"Why? *I'm* not happy! I want to see Mike! It's been nine days!" she screamed in between sobs. "You *promised* we could see each other again! A promise is **something YOU CAN'T BREAK, EVER! YOU PROMISED!**" The lights started flickering dangerously and a drop of blood appeared under El's nose.

Hopper was inside the room in two quick strides. He eased himself onto the bed beside El, pulled her into his arms and consoled her

gently as he waited for her sobs to subside. "El, honey. I'm truly sorry I couldn't give you any more good news after delivering Wheeler's note the other day. But please, just keep trusting me, okay? I haven't broken my promise, I assure you. At least for today, please let me and Aunt Joyce make your first proper Christmas one to remember." He thought back to the night he'd spent a whole hour explaining to El what Christmas was. Her eyes had filled with wondrous joy at the concept, and after that she'd rushed off to write up her very own list of presents. *Fuck that Brenner bastard. I hope hell is extra scorching on Christmas day.* It was another one of the many freedoms she'd been denied, growing up in that cruel place called the Lab. He hugged her tighter. "And then, afterwards, we'll work on this whole Mike thing."

El turned her head to gaze up at him. Wide innocent eyes still brimming with tears. "Dad? I... I... would like that."

"C'mon, it's time you took a bath and got dressed. Aunt Joyce and Will are arriving at nine. I'm cooking an extra special brunch for all of us. And then afterwards, we'll give each other our presents! Remember what you asked me to get for Will?" He ruffled her curly hair and smiled a secret, conspiratorial smile at her. "And I *know* you're going to love yours."

Hopper rolled his Blazer to a stop a few houses up from the Wheelers' and quickly scanned his surroundings. Satisfied that the street was nigh on deserted, he retrieved a package from the seat beside him and exited the car, hoping he didn't look any more conspicuous than he already did in his uniform. Being the chief of police in a small town had certain downsides - showing up anywhere unannounced tended to be a source of juicy gossip amongst the neighbors. He tucked the package under one arm and walked down the freshly shoveled path to their front door, running through his dutifully prepared script again in his mind. Bracing himself, he rang the doorbell and waited.

To his surprise and relief, Nancy answered the door. "Chief Hopper? Hi... is Mike in trouble again?"

"No more than he usually is. Look, is he home?"

"He's in the basement, brooding as usual." Nancy glanced around surreptitiously, then lowered her voice. "Mike hasn't been very happy lately. Is this about him and El? About what happened back at the cabin on Sunday?"

Hopper ducked his head, embarrassed. "Yeah, actually. Can I talk to him? I promise I'll fill you in on what's happening too. I think I'm going to need as much support as I can get at this point."

Nancy's demeanor grew slightly worried. "What about our parents?"

"I had a little story prepared for if they came to the door, but I'm glad you answered instead," he replied. "This way I have a chance to get you and *especially* Mike onside with the plan first. Then I can get this ball rolling."

Nancy nodded slowly. That Sunday she'd spent an anxious half hour sitting in the Blazer with Jonathan while Hopper and the kids had their shouting match in the cabin, but eventually he'd waved them back inside and things seemed back to normal again. During that time Jonathan and her had mulled over many weird and wonderful theories of how the argument was playing itself out, but it was clear her awkward little brother was totally head over heels for the mysterious but beautiful laboratory girl and wasn't going to back off in a hurry. She'd actually felt a deep sense of admiration towards Mike for that.

"Okay, well, how about you go around the back of the house and wait by the basement door," she said. "I'll go downstairs and quickly talk to Mike, then he can let you in that way. Don't let my parents see you."

Hopper did as he was told, and quietly made his way down the side of the house, hoping no one would hear him crunching around in the snow. He stood there and shivered from the growing late afternoon chill.

Eventually the basement door opened. Mike peered out at him and glowered. "*You*."

Hopper followed him inside. "Uhh, hi. Look, Wheeler, I need to talk

to you."

Mike collapsed onto one of the beanbags scattered around the room. "So *talk*. I haven't seen El for *four days*, Hopper," he snarled, trying to keep his voice down. "And it's getting pretty damn frustrating. You promised us you were going to work on getting her out in the world."

A flash of anger seared through Hop's brain. *Did this kid really have to be so unreasonable?* "That's why I'm here, dumbass," he hissed through clenched teeth. "This sort of thing ain't easy to arrange at the snap of a finger. It takes time and careful planning. So will you *please* just hear me out? Or I can just turn around and leave, and you can bloody well *wait another year* before you and El see each other again."

Some of the defiance left Mike's face, and he sagged into the beanbag. "I... Hopper, look, I'm sorry. I just, I... miss her, you know?"

"You *should* be sorry. Your sister told me you've been acting like a brat again," Hopper growled. He took a deep breath, then continued more calmly. "If it helps, kid, El misses you too. I can see it in the way she's been moping around the cabin since you left the other day. But she's trying her hardest to behave while I sort things out, which makes me feel like a *terrible* dad for sneaking around behind her back like this. But it's all part of the plan, you understand? So you ought to behave too, for her sake if nothing else."

The other door opened and Nancy quietly descended the stairs. "Okay. Dad's asleep in his Lay-Z-Boy as always, and Mom and Holly are in the kitchen about to start on dinner. I told Mom it was Mormons at the door and we laughed about it. They hopefully shouldn't find out you were ever here today, Hopper, but I'd try keeping it quick." She crossed her arms and looked expectantly between the two.

"Thanks, Nancy." He held out the package he'd been carrying to Mike. "Here. For you. Merry early Christmas. Go ahead and open it."

Mike eyed it suspiciously, but took it anyway. He tore open the brown paper wrapping, and stared dumbfounded at what lay underneath. "Holy *shit*. A Supercom *High Power!*"

"That's right. And I got one for El, too. But *she* won't be opening hers until Christmas Day." He could see the sudden glimmer of understanding on the faces of both Wheeler kids. "It seems appropriate, given you tried calling her for 353 days and all. Like I said, I'm still working on the finer details, but once Christmas rolls around, this should allow you and El to at least talk to each other while I get this plan in motion."

"This is totally tubular," Mike murmured, turning the shiny new walkie talkie over in his hands. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you!* Dustin and Will and Lucas and Max are going to be *sooo* jealous! It's got *eight times* the range as our regular ones!" In the background, Nancy rolled her eyes.

Hopper did, too. "Right. So if anyone asks where you got it from, tell them you worked extra hard pawning stolen Walkmans or something. You're a smart kid, I'm sure you can think of some explanation."

"Okay Hop. Thanks, this is going to mean a lot to El and me."

"I know it will, kid. On to the next thing." Hopper deposited himself onto the couch and conspiratorially leaned forward. "In a day or two I'm going to *officially* drop by and talk to your parents about you and El. *Jane*, her real name." Mike started to protest but Hop silenced him with a raised hand. Nancy looked a bit worried, but they both let him continue. "I'm going to explain that she's my daughter from a past fling, and it got to the point where her mother couldn't take care of her anymore. After a relative approached me I made arrangements to officially adopt her, rather than let her become a ward of the state." *At least some of it is the truth*, he thought to himself gloomily.

Mike and Nancy both digested this information in silence. Finally Nancy spoke up. "So where does Mike come in exactly?"

"Oh, he'll need to be present during this entire conversation, so he can smile and nod and agree with everything I say. I'm going to tell them that Mike and his friends have taken Jane under their wing as she adjusts to her new life in this town." He paused and fixed Mike with a piercing stare. "Now Mike here, he's taken a particular *shine* to my daughter, and approached me directly about officially asking her out. I'm going to do the *responsible* dad thing, talk to your parents and

let them know that the feeling is mutual, and both kids would like to spend more time with each other over the Christmas holidays with my blessing, and hopefully theirs. Welcome to the family, Wheeler." Hopper finished his pitch with a sardonic flourish, and sat back on the couch.

Mike stared at Hopper, open mouthed. *This crazy plan of his might just work.* "It... actually... makes perfect sense. And it's not all that far from the truth either. I'm in."

Nancy giggled and made puppy eyes at her brother. "I... I don't know how Mom and Dad are going to take that. Mike Wheeler, *nerd extraordinaire*, officially has a *girlfriend*! Ooooh, that's so *cuuute*." She danced away as Mike indignantly aimed a fist at her leg.

Hopper wearily rubbed his temples. "Also, Joyce and Will already know. They actually helped me come up with parts of this crazy scheme. Nancy, you can fill Jonathan in, if Joyce hasn't already. Will is going to tell the rest of Mike's annoying friends what the plan is, I trust they can stick to it. Mike, you're going to need to back him up too. If any of them tell their parents, well, chances are they'll check with your folks or Joyce for the full story."

Nancy nodded discreetly. "I'll phone Jonathan tonight. And what about Steve?"

Hopper blinked. "Who the *hell* is Steve? Hang on, is that the boy who's always half beat up whenever I run into him? With the ridiculous hair?"

"Yeah, that's him," Mike laughed. Now it was his turn to make puppy eyes at Nancy, to which she carefully ignored.

"Fine, tell him too. But beyond that, nobody else needs to know any of the finer details, not that there are any *fine details*. Let 'em fill in the blanks however they like. You know what my reputation's like around this damned town already," Hopper growled. "One more salacious tidbit's not going to dent it much more than it already is. Enough people in Hawkins know at least *some* of my past history." He flung his arms about in feigned annoyance. "There's already a bunch of rumors flying around about Joyce and me, so what does it matter?"

Nancy and Mike both looked smugly at each other, but said nothing.

"Okay," Hopper continued after a moment. "I should probably get going. I have to get back to the station, and then meet with the school principal about getting El enrolled at Hawkins Middle at some point in the new year." He knew it would be an uphill battle given Eleven's limited personal development thanks to that hellish bastard Brenner, but damned if he wasn't determined to make things work. At least Wheeler had his back now. "After I come by to see your parents, I'll outline the next stage of the plan. I promise you'll like it."

"Thanks Hopper. Again I'm really sorry for snapping at you earlier," Mike said quietly. "I can see the wait will be worth it." He suddenly scrambled to his feet, grabbed a pen and piece of paper off the table and started scribbling furiously. "Could you... please give this to El? I want her to know I haven't forgotten about her."

"I will. Thank you both for understanding. " Hopper glanced at the words, smiled, stuck the note into his jacket pocket and made to leave, but then held up a finger and turned back to the two Wheeler kids. "Actually, there was one more thing. Do you think your parents would mind an extra guest for Christmas dinner?"

Christmas brunch turned out to be giant homemade buttermilk waffle stacks, layered with blueberries, cranberries, bananas, strawberries AND fresh cream, drizzled with maple syrup and hot fudge, and presented with a side of bacon and sausage. El's eyes had grown wide when Hopper had plonked her serving down on the table with a big grin. "Now you see why I had to be up at six-three-zero, *cooking!*" he'd chortled at her.

The presents had all been exchanged, and now El was feeling giddy and breathless as she sat on the rug and opened hers one by one. First up Aunt Joyce had presented her with five exquisitely wrapped packages, and she'd quickly unwrapped each one to reveal a pair of snug-fitting Levis, two pairs of cute wooly socks, a new sundress, three new shirts, and two sweaters.

"So pretty..." she breathed. "Thank you, Aunt Joyce!"

"It's past time you had some proper clothes of your own," Joyce Byers smiled proudly. "El, one day soon Nancy and I will take you out shopping. We'll go to the new Starcourt Mall and you can shop for *anything* you want, and we'll take as long as you like!"

Will's present was next. He'd gotten her a funny little board game called Boggle. "I can teach you afterwards if you like," he offered. "So the next time Mike comes over to see you, or when you start coming to hang out with us, you'll know exactly how to play it." She hugged and thanked him excitedly in return. Will had been the last of the party to meet El, and she'd found him to be the sweetest and shyest one out of all of them. They could see a lot of themselves in each other, which had made them fast friends.

Even Jonathan and Nancy had gotten her something, a cute wristband that she could wear to help hide her tattoo in public. El put it on eagerly and held up her arm for Hopper to inspect. "The color even matches Sara's hairband!"

Joyce and Will both nodded their agreement. Hopper smiled sadly at his daughter. "Aww honey, it's really cute!"

El looked at the three of them and beamed. "Thank you for all the presents! Best first Christmas *ever*."

"You're welcome, El! It was really no problem," Joyce replied. "We want to start getting you ready for a normal life."

"*But wait, there's more...*" With a grand flourish, Hopper produced one final large box from seemingly out of nowhere. "From me to you, El. Merry Christmas!"

El took the box and turned it over slowly in her hands. It was quite heavy, and didn't rattle much when she shook it. She tore off the wrapping.

"Supercom High Power," she mouthed the syllables slowly, reading the logo on the side. "All mine?" Hopper nodded and she hugged him lovingly.

"Whoa, El, that's really awesome!" Will exclaimed. "Is it so she can

talk to the rest of our group, Chief?"

Hopper looked at Joyce. He seemed happier than she had ever seen him in a long time. "That's the plan, kid. Well, for now it's mainly for her to keep in touch with Wheeler. See, I have it on good authority that he now has *his* very own Supercom High Power-"

"**NO WAY!**" Will exclaimed. "Man, now I kinda want one too. It's got like, *ten times* more range than our regular Supercoms!"

"Eight times," Hopper corrected him mildly.

"You could mow lawns all next summer to pay for one?" Joyce suggested, half-kidding.

"Maybe Mom. Or we could finally build that antenna we've been talking about!" Will answered.

"An... tenna?" El asked curiously.

"It'll boost the range of all our regular Supercoms! Meaning the rest of us can all talk to each other without issues anymore! And El too!" Will's face grew sad. "Bob was the one who came up with the design. He was going to help me and Jonathan build it, but he... he died before he got the chance." He looked at El and his expression brightened. "On the flip side, we think we can still build it with Mr. Clarke's help! He's our science teacher at school, and he runs the AV department so he's an electronics guru like Bob was. I'm sure Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max will all pitch in as well."

Joyce looked at her son proudly. "That would be one nice way to carry on Bob's legacy," she said, her voice getting a little choked. Hopper put a consoling arm around her. She didn't seem to mind.

"Great idea, kid. But as Hawkins police chief, I think you should do the sensible thing, and wait until the weather warms up first," Hopper suggested. "I don't want to get a call from those Loch Nora snobs next week saying a bunch of kids have frozen to death up on that hill. That would be *way* too much paperwork for this time of year." He turned back to Eleven. "Anyway, as I was saying... this is my very first Christmas gift to you, El. From today until the end of the

holidays, you have my full permission to use it to call your boyfriend *whenever* you want, as long as he's there, and vice versa. We'll review things again once school starts."

El's heart fluttered and she squealed in excitement. *Dad called him my boyfriend! He finally accepts Mike and me should be together! And now we can talk again!* The tension of the last nine days promptly melted away as she picked up her new Supercom and started examining it closely, marvelling at all of its shiny bells and whistles. "I'm going to call Mike soon!" she breathlessly declared.

Hopper nodded and continued. "Now do you believe me when I said this entire time that I've been working on it?"

El nodded happily. "Yes! Thank you! I'm sorry I was angry with you."

He encircled her in a crushing bear hug. "You're welcome, kiddo. And I'm sorry too, for not being able to tell you sooner. By the way, there's something else in the box for you."

El hadn't actually noticed, so was glad he'd mentioned it. She shook the box and a card fluttered out. It was another note from Mike! She unfolded it and read the scratchy handwritten words carefully.

TO MY DEAREST EL,

***YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED
TO CHRISTMAS DINNER AT
THE WHEELER HOUSEHOLD
TONIGHT, DECEMBER 25 1984
AT SIX-THREE-ZERO PM.***

***WITH ALL OF MY LOVE,
MIKE WHEELER***

***P.S. I LOVE YOU MORE THAN
ANYTHING ELSE IN THE
ENTIRE UNIVERSE.***

***P.P.S. CALL ME ONCE YOU
GET THIS MESSAGE.***

CHANNEL ELEVEN.

I quite enjoy writing those Mike-Hopper verbal sparring matches.

Onto the next chapter!

7. Truth or Dare?

A bit of gushing about Mucas? Lumax? in this chapter.

This one stalled for ages, but finally grew from *that* scene in the Season 3 trailer of Max dancing around El's bedroom, while El chills out on her bed. So many warm fuzzies.

Smut factor, low to moderate. Warning - some cussing too, but I blame Billy's influence on poor Max.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 3, 1985

Truth or Dare?

Words, words and expressions

All these confessions of where we stand

How I see you and you see me

Dedications of symmetry

Together, we will be forever

- **Promises**, Fugazi

Max closed her book with a final, decisive snap, stretched her tired muscles and yawned. "Alright, I'm bored of probability and statistics. Did you learn much today?"

Eleven glanced down at the doodles filling her notebook and giggled, "Enough, I think," then looked up at the clock above Max's dresser which read **1:47 PM**. "Max? It's not even four-one-five yet."

"C'mon El, it's *Christmas break!* We deserve to finish early for once." Max leaned over and inspected the contents of El's page. "Hah, you barely made any notes today anyway. It's all just drawings!" She shook her fiery mane of hair in feigned annoyance. For the last two hours they'd been sitting on her bed, listening to music and poring dutifully through a couple of Max's stuffy school textbooks.

"Sorry. Hard to concentrate today," El replied with a shy smile. She'd

found the handful of study time sessions she'd had so far with Max to be a useful and exciting journey into new words, concepts and expressions, but today her thoughts constantly kept drifting back to Mike, to the time she'd spent with him the previous night, to all the pleasurable things they'd done to each other in private. She shifted uncomfortably in her cross-legged position and rubbed her thighs to get some feeling back into them, then picked up her pencil to resume her latest idle sketch.

"Yeah, me too. It's such a pity the weather's so lame and we're stuck indoors," Max was saying. "Could have gone down to the arcade and shown you how to play Dig Dug. Still, not having my *asshole* stepbrother around has been a fair trade." She breathed a silent sigh of relief.

Billy was currently off spending the holidays in California. He'd been avoiding her anyway - which was no easy task in the modest house they shared with their step-parents - ever since that night she'd knocked him out with a needle full of strong sedatives to prevent him from severely injuring both Lucas and Steve, but she knew sooner or later he'd try to get even for that stunt.

Max glanced again at the cute brunette doodling quietly next to her. That was also the night her and Eleven had finally met. Their relationship hadn't started off on the best of terms, and it had taken the combined efforts of all the boys, especially Mike and Lucas, to convince them to agree to an uneasy truce at first. But they'd quickly resolved their differences, and now here they were hanging out like there had never been any bad blood to begin with. She was glad things had turned out this way. It made it slightly easier to adjust to life in this strange little town.

El looked up and put her notepad aside. She finally moved out of her cramped stance and stretched out on the bed. "Max, what can we do instead of arcade or study?" she asked earnestly.

Max rolled languidly onto her stomach next to El, idly kicking up her legs. "Well... I was thinking... remember how yesterday, you asked what 'truth or dare' was?"

"Yes. After we came back downstairs. We never finished the D&D

game."

Max snorted. "If you could call it that. Somebody ought to tell Dustin he makes his D&D campaigns a little too hard for newbies." She shrugged diplomatically. "Still, I'm starting to get the hang of it. Anyway, truth or dare?" A wicked gleam came into her eye. "Since you don't know what it is, how about we play a couple of practice rounds together to ease you into it?"

El chewed on her lip in contemplation. "Mike... said it could be *embarrassing*. People ask stupid questions, make you do stupid dares," she mumbled.

"Oh *c'mon* El, it's just you and me right now!" wheedled Max. "I won't force you to answer a question or perform a dare if you don't wanna. And we can always make a special rule for when we play it with the guys, like **no** questions about your past." She felt like that was probably the right thing to do, and was quietly confident she could cajole the others into following along.

Max waited for Eleven's answer, but none came at first. The music playing quietly in the background faded to silence and she looked away, suddenly glad for the welcome distraction. "Think about it for a minute, El," she said, bounding off the bed and crossing the room to her small ghetto blaster. She hit the Eject button, replaced the cassette with another one from her collection, then hit Play, turning the volume up a couple of notches first.

The music started up again and El's eyes lit up when she recognized the tune. *Do you wanna dance?* It was The Police's *Every Breath You Take*, the first song that her and Mike had danced to, the night of the Snow Ball. *I... don't know how.* The song they had kissed to. "Max! I remember this song!" The memory floated before her eyes clear as day. *I don't either... do you wanna figure it out?*

"Oh yeah, it's a little gift Stalker made me for Christmas," Max gushed. "He managed to get all the songs they played at the Snow Ball put on a mix tape. As a memory of our first night officially together as a couple! Pretty cute, huh?"

Stalker was Max's funny pet name for Lucas, El knew. She nodded and

patted Max's arm. "Mike and me, we have special memories of that too. I'm glad we're friends now, Max."

"Me too!" Max replied sincerely, ducking her head. "When I first moved to Hawkins I was angry and bitter and *shit scared* of being an outcast. But even though I was a dick about it at first, Lucas and the others all accepted me as part of your group, which is totally awesome. Even you did too, El. It's nice having another girl to hang out with." She sighed contentedly, and rolled onto her back to stare at the ceiling. "You know, when Hopper and Mrs. Byers asked, I said yes to these study sessions so you could learn more about the real world. But it's also nice hanging out together without the boys once in a while."

El chewed on her lip again and digested Max's shrewdly disguised sales pitch, still recalling Mike's apprehension and veiled warning from the day before. But then Karen Wheeler's cheerful words floated into her mind: *Oh loosen up Mike!* and she finally made up her mind with a firm nod. "Alright Max. After this song? I want to learn about truth or dare."

"Okay. So some rules of the game." Max placed the spinner from her Twister set on the bed between her and El. "Everyone sits in a circle around the spinner, and we all decide who gets to start. Back home we usually picked the person who went to the bathroom last. But you can make any sort of rule up really." She snickered as El nodded slowly at her explanation, and waved a hand at the spinner. "Spin the arrow and say *truth or dare?* to the person it lands on. If it lands on yourself, spin again. Go on, you can start."

El gave the contraption a gentle spin, and it wobbled around a bit before settling on a point somewhere between Max and the edge of the bed. She looked up at her redheaded friend, who mouthed the words *truth or dare?* back at her, and waited eagerly for her to continue.

"Oh. Yes. Truth or dare?"

"Truth!" Max answered instantly. "Now you get to ask me any question you like, as long as it doesn't break any rules. And I have to

answer your question truthfully. You know, friends don't lie."

El put a finger over her mouth in concentration, thinking of something to ask the other girl. "Who do you... like most... out of Dustin. And Lucas. And Will. And... Mike?" she finally asked.

Max's eyes narrowed at first, but then she let out an carefree little laugh. "Oh El, that's easy. *Lucas* of course!"

El nodded again in understanding. "I see. Well, I know you're not lying. About liking Lucas most."

Max touched El's shoulder. "See, that's all there is to it! The only other thing is what to do when someone does gets caught lying, or passes on a question or a dare." She gestured to her backpack lying in the corner of the room. Peeking out the top was the bottle of bourbon she'd shown off to everyone at Mike's house the previous day. Max lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "I saw Billy play this game once with his piece of shit friends. Every time someone passed or got caught lying they had to take a shot of bourbon. Which was pretty much every round."

"Mike said that was a bad idea," El commented, recalling her boyfriend's reaction.

"Wheeler just doesn't want his parents catching us. Or worse, your *dad*. The invitation's still open to play it here instead. Lucas is in, and I'm sure Will and Dustin are too." She looked at her friend impishly, then spun the pointer. "Alright. Truth or dare?"

"Truth," El replied.

Max leaned closer to El. "When did you and Mike first figure out... that you were *in love*?"

El inclined her head in contemplation. "I... we... after he found me in the rain that night. On Mirkwood. He built me the fort to stay in. The next day, he skipped school. Stayed with me. After that... we just... *knew*." Her expression turned slightly melancholic. *Mike took me home, gave me clean clothes, somewhere safe to sleep. He treated me with dignity and stood up for me when no one else would.*

Max's eyes glimmered and she clasped her hands together in adoration. "Aww El, that's *so cute!* I can just imagine it too. Wheeler's so overprotective it hurts to watch sometimes, but I can see that you two clearly care about each other."

El smiled at her friend shyly. "Thank you." She flicked the pointer in response. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth," Max replied.

"You and Lucas. When did *you...* figure it out?"

Max let out a giggle. "Oh, El! I *knew* you were going to do that to me." Her brow furrowed. "It was the night you came back to Hawkins. We were trapped... in a freakin' *bus*. In that creepy old junkyard, waiting to be eaten by Demo-dogs. Dustin was being a dick to me so I went and hung out with Lucas on top of the bus." *I like talking with you, Madmax. And I like talking with you, Stalker.* "We got talking about life, about *shit* really. We realized we cared more about each other than we were willing to admit, and then it was like a lightbulb went on in both our minds." Now it was her turn to smile shyly back at her friend.

The girls continued playing for a couple dozen more rounds, asking all sorts of candid questions about each other, interspersed with Max demonstrating various kinds of dares to El and explaining some of the most esoteric rules along the way. With each turn El found herself getting more and more into the spirit of the game, to the point where she even wondered what Mike's initial apprehension had been all about. She finally felt at ease with the redhead girl, and was truly sorry she'd once tried to injure her with her mind.

"I dare you. To... lick the window." El chortled hysterically at the sight of Max with her tongue stuck to the freezing cold glass.

"Ow, my tongue!" Max grumbled as she dived back onto the bed. She fixed her brunette friend with a piercing stare. "El, I think you're starting to enjoy this a bit *too* much. Time to kick things up a notch. Truth or dare?"

"Truth," El replied.

Max leaned forward conspiratorially and lowered her voice to a whisper. "So, are you and Mike... *fucking*... yet?"

"What is-" Eleven began, but Max had already anticipated El's likely response, and launched straight into her explanation without even pausing. "*Fucking* means to have *sex*. It's a naughty word Billy uses whenever he knows our parents aren't around to hear him cussing. That's the cool thing about English. You can say all kinds of different words that mean the same thing. *Soooo*, are you and Mike...?"

El blinked and averted her eyes in sudden realization. "Wait. Max. Are we... still playing truth or dare?"

Max's eyes gleamed mischievously, the same way they'd done earlier. "You know what? I think you've got the hang of the game now." She leaned even closer to El. "I just thought we could have an honest girls-only chat about relationships. About our *boyfriends*." The mischief in her eyes gave way to something more wistful. "You and Mike make it look so *easy* by comparison. Lucas and I don't seem to have the same sort of spark... yet."

El thought back to a conversation she'd had with Aunt Joyce about Hopper. "It takes time at first. You have to ease into it. Let things flow... naturally," she insisted, struggling with the words. "But Mike and me are different. We just *knew*."

"I know, I know. And I'm *soooo jealous* of that, El." Max took a deep breath. "I guess... I don't want Lucas to lose interest in me."

"He won't? Maybe... *don't* guess?" Eleven thought of all the times Mike had reaffirmed his love for her covertly and overtly and vice versa. "Do lots of cuddles. Do nice stuff for each other. Talk on the Supercom more." She pointed at the ghetto blaster. "Lucas made *you* a mix tape. Things like that."

Max chewed on her lip, digesting El's basic but honestly earnest words. "Yes... I- you're right. Thank you for the advice, El." She shook her head and the spark of mischief finally came back into her eyes. "You know, you still haven't answered my question yet. *Are you and Mike...?*"

El sagged a little but pulled her thoughts together. "Aunt Joyce gave me a... sex talk... before the Snow Ball." She paused again, struggling to push aside all of the delectable images the word *sex* conjured up in her mind's eye of her and Mike together, in order to grasp the singular concept she was searching for.

Max was leaning forward so much in anticipation of El's response that their faces were almost touching. "Mmmmyeeesssss?"

"We're... just fooling around," she carefully stated.

Max pulled away sharply. "*What!* What's that supposed to mean? The way you and Wheeler act around each other all the time, I'd have expected you to have gone all the way by now," she sniffed.

Gone all the way? El rubbed her temples wearily, the way Hopper often did whenever his brain hurt. All of these new words and expressions were starting to become a pain to process. "What is-"

"Oh El, you're so innocent it's beyond cute. Going all the way means, has Mike put his pee pee in your wa wa yet? *Has he put his dick in your pussy?*"

El's eyes widened in surprise. "Max! That's so *naughty*," she gasped.

Just then the music in the background changed to an up-tempo rock number, cutting off the rest of El's response, and now it was Max whose eyes lit up in recognition. She clutched at the other girl's shoulders. "El! Remember this song from the Snow Ball?"

"Sort of? They played many pretty songs." In the end, Eleven and Mike had ended up dancing and cuddling to almost all of them, while everybody else looked on in awe at the two lovebirds hogging the dance floor. She recalled them both being unable to take their hands off each other for *hours*.

"Stalker... Lucas... calls it his song to remember me by. *Love Me to the Max*, by The Romantics. Get it?" Max was almost giddy with excitement. "It's pretty clever, actually." She contorted her face into a passably accurate rock-star sneer, and started to lipsynch the words.

So come on - baby's holding back

*So come on - give me all you got
Love me to the max!
Love me to the max!*

"See? Lucas **does** love you. To the *max*," El pointed out matter-of-factly.

Max stopped, and blushed in realization. "I-I... yeah, I suppose he *does*!" She patted El's arm happily. "Oh, El! This is why hanging out with you is so awesome. You help me see things I keep missing."

El threw Max one of her warm dimple-faced smiles. "Yes. Me too."

Max composed herself, her thoughts returning to the conversation they'd been having before this latest distraction, and held her hands up in a gesture that read *hold on a minute*. "Okay. Okay. Sooo let me get this straight then. You and Mike *haven't* fucked? Haven't *gone all the way*?"

"I... didn't know it was a thing," El whispered.

Max's jaw dropped and she stared incredulously at the brunette. "Mrs. Byers gave you a sex talk, but she didn't even cover the most important part?" she demanded.

"Max? I don't... Aunt Joyce... said Mike and me aren't *ready*," El answered quietly. "She said... we'll talk more about it another time."

Max blew a stray strand of hair out of her face in quiet awe. It was a fair enough justification, she finally decided. Her friend had just spent the first twelve years of her life cruelly locked away in a lab, denied even the most basic of rights. It almost seemed like far too much to dump on her in the short space of time since she'd finally earned her freedom. She reached out and took El's hand in hers. "I-I'm *really* sorry, El. I keep forgetting you're still finding your way in the world. Look, forget I even said anything, okay? I won't bring it up again until after you're ready to have that talk with Will's mom. Please forgive me?"

El squeezed her friend's hand gently to signify everything was alright. "Yes. It's okay. But if you must know. About fooling around with

Mike?"

Max smiled forlornly. "Now that would just be rude of me. I... shouldn't force you. You don't need to say anything if you don't wanna."

"Max. It's okay." She squeezed Max's hand again and leaned closer to the redhead. "I rubbed his dick with my hands. Put my mouth on it. White stuff came out and it tasted *funny*. I made him... use his fingers and mouth on *me*. Down there. It... made me *happy*."

Both girls were blushing furiously now. El didn't know why, but it felt so naughty spilling these secrets to her girl friend in private, especially without any of the boys present.

Max realized her jaw was on the floor again. She looked away and took another deep breath. "Wow. El, I..." She really couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes. Now you know. Friends don't lie." For a long while both girls were silent, lost in their own thoughts and desires. Finally El stirred, and fixed Max with a sharp stare. "Have you and Lucas... *fucked*?" Her heart raced a bit as her lips formed the naughty new word.

Max looked down into her lap. "No... we... I don't think we're ready for it, either. We mostly just kiss and touch a lot. I made Lucas put his hands under my shirt a few times, it felt good. And I rubbed his dick through his pants. Pretty sure he liked that too. But you've gone and given me some new ideas," she finished dreamily.

"Call Lucas tonight?" El suggested.

Max's face reddened even more. "Heh, maybe? It's making me all tingly even thinking about it." She leaned away and stared up at the ceiling once more. "El, don't answer if you don't wanna... but... what is the *kinkiest* thing you and Mike have done?" she finally inquired.

"Kinkiest?" El asked. "What is 'kinkiest'?"

Max blew another strand of hair out of her face. "You know, like, the *most naughty thing ever*?"

El pursed her lips. "Oh! That's easy. When I rubbed my bare feet... on his..."

Max's eyes grew very wide. "El! *Wh...*" she spluttered. "Ummm, okay I guess that *is* pretty kinky." She looked down and wiggled her socked toes. "I wonder... if Lucas would... like it?"

Just then, the girls heard a very distinct hiss of static coming from El's satchel. It was her Supercom. "Mage, this is Paladin. Come in, Mage. Over."

El bounced off Max's bed and retrieved the walkie talkie from her bag. "Mage here. Over," she answered happily, carefully avoiding Max's teasing eye-roll upon hearing their pet names for each other.

"El? Lucas's been trying to phone Max's house for the last thirty minutes. You two alright? Over," Mike's response came back.

She looked at Max who covered her mouth in surprise. They'd been so engrossed in their afternoon activity that neither of them had even heard the phone ringing.

"Didn't hear it," she answered truthfully. "Is there a problem? Over."

"No problem at all," he assured her. "Lucas was just wondering if you two wanna come sledding in the park with us? I'm sure you're both totally bored of study by now. The weather's cleared up and it's way too nice to be stuck indoors. Over."

El hit the Transmit button on her Supercom again. "Roger that. Yes please. Getting ready now. Over."

"Copy that. My mom will be over to pick you two up soon. I'll tell Hopper to come grab you from my house later. That's if he's even going back to the cabin tonight. The road out there's still pretty gnarly." There was a hopeful note in Mike's voice. "Maybe he'll let you stay the night again? Over."

Max was looking at her with huge puppy dog eyes. *Ohmygod that's soooo cute*, her expression read.

"I... I would like that. See you soon," El said slowly into the

Supercom. "I... love you. Over."

"I love *you* more. Over and out." The transmission ended.

Max glanced out the window at the now cloudless sky and mid-afternoon sun beaming off the snow-covered ground. She turned to El. "Well, looks like girl time's over for today. Let's go hang out with our two favorite dweebs." She grinned, jumped off the bed and began rifling through her wardrobe for some warmer clothes.

El nodded. "Max?" she said quietly as she started to gather up her own belongings. "Ask Lucas if you can stay with him tonight."

If you've managed to make it this far, thank you for reading!

Anyone else wonder what else could have been on the music playlist for the Hawkins Middle Snow Ball '84?

I went back and rewatched the S3 trailer - and yes, the girls are actually in El's bedroom in the cabin (not Max's room after all). Looks like it got that well deserved makeover!

8. School Daze

The world-building takes a slightly darker turn in this chapter. I flip-flopped between ideas for a while, some tense and others not overly so, but finally decided this was probably one of the more logical directions to go in.

If you're curious to see one way this arc could have ended, feel free to read the separate story called 'The Dark Inside Her'.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 7, 1985
School Daze

*So needless to say
I'm odds and ends
But I'll be
Stumbling away
Slowly learning that life is okay
- **Take On Me**, A-ha*

Vines. *Everywhere*. Darkness. Dampness. *Stench*.

Heart beating frantically. Horror. Dread. *Terror*.

The Upside Down.

Is that something moving in the shadows?

Demo-dogs. Demogorgon. *Mind Flayer*.

Shit.

Run.

RUN!

RUNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN

Eleven whirled. Her eyes widened.

Vines seethed, slithered around her legs, threatened to upset her balance. Intent on murder.

Was that a... *face*?

In the wall.

Mike's face.

NO!

DON'T TAKE HIM!

MIKE! NO! Please, *please no!*

And then suddenly the world inverted, she was back in her bed, and Mike was holding her, calling her name over and over, trying to calm her, soothe her.

"Kid? Wheeler? Everything alright?" Hopper's sleepy voice called through the door. Usually he would barge straight in and scoop El up into his arms whenever the nightmares came. But this time he knew Mike was there, and had chosen not to invade their privacy.

"Hop, it's fine," Mike called back softly. "Go back to bed."

"Mike! Oh, please, no! *Please!*" she sobbed into his chest as the last of the Upside Down nightmare world drained away to be overtaken by reality once more. Mike squeezed his girlfriend tighter against his own body, and kept whispering sweet nothings until her heartbeat and her ragged breathing eventually slowed.

Wearily, he glanced over at the muted red glow of the clock on El's dresser. It read **5:11 AM**. *At least she nearly made it through to morning*, he thought. He could hear Hopper moving around elsewhere in the cabin and closed his eyes, willing the tension away.

"Mike?"

"I'm here El," he whispered gently. "Don't be scared, you're not

dreaming anymore."

"I saw you... Upside Down. In the wall. *It got you*," she whimpered to her boyfriend.

"It's okay, it was just a bad dream. I'm here for you now and always will be," he repeated, stroking El's curly hair.

El's hands reached for Mike's and guided them under her sweater, purely yearning for his warm touch against her bare skin and nothing more. She slipped a leg over his. "*Hold me*," she pleaded. Her hands crept up under Mike's own shirt to rest on his stomach. For a while they lay tangled together, listening to each other's breathing, and to the world outside the cabin that was just beginning to stir.

A quiet knock at the door roused them both from a gentle snooze. "El? It's six-zero-zero AM. Six o'clock Monday morning. First day of school, remember? Come on out when you're both ready, but we need to be on the road by seven-one-five. Seven fifteen."

El blinked the gummy feeling out of her eyes, suddenly aware that Mike's hands were still under her sweater, now spontaneously cupping her breasts. She also felt the very distinct pressure of his morning wood against the junction of her thighs. Mike muttered as she moved drowsily against him, knowing that very soon they had to get up and face what lay ahead. His eyes fluttered open as she settled for a sensual good morning kiss instead of giving in to sheer instinct.

"Morning," he said, once they'd broken apart. He smiled sheepishly when he realized her hand was lightly caressing the bulge in his pajamas. She rubbed her socked toes gently along his leg.

"*School today*," El whispered. She looked apprehensive and a little bit sad.

Hopper threw another log on the fire, set the kettle to boil and collapsed back into his chair by the dining table, trying his hardest not to think about what could be happening on the other side of El's bedroom door right now. *Hopefully nothing*. He'd felt uneasy about letting Wheeler stay over on what was technically the first school night of the new year, but knew that El needed all the support she

could get leading up to her very first day in unfamiliar territory.

It also helped that whenever Mike stayed with Eleven, the nightmares came a lot less frequently.

The kettle whistled and Hopper shut it off, busying himself with his morning coffee and hot chocolates for the kids. El had slept through until 5AM, which was the longest ever stretch she'd gone without waking up in sheer terror during the night. He felt thankful for that if nothing else.

El's bedroom door creaked open, and the two teens padded out holding hands. Hopper glanced at his daughter, then at Wheeler, then at their hands firmly clasped together, and calmly took a sip of his coffee. "Morning, kid. Wheeler. Ready for your big day?"

"Think so," El answered quietly.

"Morning Hop," Mike mumbled. He looked at his feet and shuffled nervously.

Hopper set his coffee down and indicated the two steaming mugs on the table. "Hot chocolate's up, and I'll fix us all breakfast in a minute. Take your time eating and getting ready. We're not leaving for a while yet but it's treacherous out there with the snowy conditions so I'm allowing for extra time." He looked at Mike again. "You still sure you want me to drop you at Will's on the way in?"

"It's probably better if I'm not seen getting out of the Hawkins Chief of Police's truck on the first day back at school," Mike replied.

Hop snorted. "Worried about your reputation?"

"I'm more worried about El," Mike shot back. "Bad enough having my *mom* fawning over us like we're about to get married. It would be unfair on El if the whole damn school jumped to conclusions too."

"Alright, suit yourself. But people are going to talk anyway. It's a small town." Hopper turned and walked back to the kitchen. "Cereal or Eggos?"

"Class? This is Jane. Jane Hopper. Chief Hopper's daughter," Mr. Clarke announced by way of introduction. "She's starting as a part-time student at Hawkins Middle, and will be joining us for classes every Monday and Thursday until the end of semester, so please make her feel welcome. Jane, we've arranged to sit you next to Michael Wheeler." He indicated the desk on Mike's left.

Eleven scanned the room nervously, and felt some relief as she caught sight of Max, and of Lucas. She spotted Will, and then Dustin. And of course, there was her one and only Mike, giving her that cute goofy look she would always love. Their faces all radiated a sense of sympathy, and of triumph at her first foray back into the realm of normalcy. A low buzz rippled around the room as she started making her way over to her desk. Some of the more well-connected kids sniggered, or hid smirks behind their hands or textbooks. Clearly the rumor mill about town had been churning much faster than anticipated. El could feel a number of eyes on her, but she carefully ignored them all.

"Retarded *lovechild*," muttered the posh girl sitting next to Dustin. He turned and glared at her in shock, but she didn't acknowledge him.

Mike's look had changed to one of slight concern as El shrugged off her satchel and sat down next to him. She reached down to pull out her textbook and their eyes met for the briefest second. He jerked lightly as he felt her mind touch his. *It's okay Mike. Let the mouth breathers laugh. Love you.*

"Love you more," he stage-whispered, knowing she'd hear.

"Okay class, shall we commence our lesson then?" Mr. Clarke said briskly, turning to the blackboard. "Before the break, we spoke about the phases of the Moon, and its effects on gravitational pull. Let's recap by focusing our attention on page 263, figure vii..."

The bell finally rang to signal the end of first period. There was a mad flurry of activity as everybody rushed to gather up their belongings and began filing out of the classroom in chaotic fashion. Eleven, who wasn't used to the routine at all, was much slower to react. Mike and Will stopped to give her a quick helping hand and together they started for the exit.

Mr. Clarke met the group at the door. "Boys? Max. Jane. A very brief word please? I'm not sure how much Chief Hopper has already said, but I want you to know that I'm grateful you've all agreed to take Jane under your wing for the two days a week she attends class." He glanced between all six members of the party and focused on El. "Now Jane, I take it you've already met your tutor, whom you'll be working with every other day?"

El ducked her head and nodded shyly.

"Good!" Mr. Clarke replied enthusiastically. "I know it's going to be difficult adjusting to school life at first, so if you do feel overwhelmed, please feel free to use the AV room as your safe place." He dug a key out of his desk drawer and handed it to El.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"You're welcome. Enjoy the rest of your day!" he answered cheerfully, and turned back to his desk as more students began filing into the room for second period.

"Oh man, someone slipped me a note during class," Will complained bitterly as the group walked down the busy hallway to their next lesson. "It said *hey zombie boy, can you set me up a date with your mom's boyfriend's hot daughter?* If I find out who it was, I'm going to break their arm."

"Yeah, that bitch Vicky Hall was whispering awful things under her breath after El walked in," Dustin replied, his tone almost as resentful as Will's. "We've barely made it past first period. Why do other kids have to be such assholes?"

"Let them laugh. We know we're better than that," Max said, but she looked slightly worried as she glanced over at El. "Are you sure you'll be okay, El?"

El looked over at her redheaded friend and nodded, but they could all see the tension in her eyes. She badly wanted to reach out and grasp Mike's hand if only for a bit of solace, but knew that it would attract more unwelcome attention in the crowded public space.

"Some of us have the same classes as Mike and El today," Lucas was saying. "Let's try sitting together as much as possible."

"Good idea," Mike replied. The others all nodded in agreement.

Just then the bell rang for the start of second period. "*Shit*, let's hustle," Dustin exclaimed. He and Will sprinted off down a cross corridor to their next class while the others continued on to theirs.

Thankfully the second and third periods passed with little fuss. Each new teacher introduced El to their class as Jane Hopper, she would be assigned a seat next to Mike, and there would be a minor amount of consternation that quickly died down. As the morning crawled on, other kids timidly started to come up and introduce themselves to her. A gaggle of popular girls even recognized her and Mike from the night of the Snow Ball, and proceeded to shower them with a mixture of wide-eyed adoration and respect. Mike didn't enjoy the attention at all of course, but El readily drank it all in, still getting used to life outside the lab.

By the time the bell rang to signal the start of lunchtime, El was feeling slightly more confident than she'd been at the start of the day. She packed her books into her satchel and turned to her boyfriend, who was just about to zip his backpack closed. "Mike?"

Mike turned at the sound of her voice. "Jane?" They'd agreed to call her that when other people were within earshot. "It's lunchtime now! We can go get some food from the cafeteria, and then head to the AV room for 40 minutes or so. Before our next class."

"Eggs for lunch?" she asked hopefully.

Mike hoisted his backpack onto his shoulder. "Nahhh. Lunchlady Phyllis *thinks* she's got a sense of humor, so Mondays are always meatloaf Mondays." He snorted and made a face. "If you can even call it *meat*. C'mon, let's go find the others."

Eleven pushed a piece of dry meatloaf listlessly around the tray with her fork, wishing it were a stack of Eggs instead. All around her, the school cafeteria was awash with commotion - hundreds of kids all

eating, laughing and talking at once. Mike hadn't been kidding either. The food was bland, totally unappetizing, and faintly reminiscent of the gruel they used to feed her in the lab. She took a shuddering breath and squeezed her eyes shut as the memories of that awful place flooded in and threatened to overwhelm her mind.

A persistent voice finally broke through El's despairing thoughts, and she slowly opened her eyes again. "El? El. *El!!!!*. Are you gonna eat that?" It was Dustin. He'd already finished his serving.

Mike glared at him across the table. "Dustin, *shut the...*" He trailed off when he noticed the look on El's face. "El? Are you alright?"

"I'll... I'll be okay," she stammered. "Just... bad memories of the lab." Her hand found Mike's under the table. "Trying to block them out." She took a few more deep shaky breaths, and this time succeeded in pushing them firmly to the back of her consciousness.

"Remember, those bastards *can't* hurt you anymore," Mike murmured back. "It's *over*. You're safe with us now." The others voiced their agreement.

Suddenly a shadow fell across their table. It was Greg McCorkle, one of their other classmates. "So this is the chief's fabled *lovechild* we've all been hearing about," he said in an even tone, looking at El.

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "What the *hell's* that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Greg shrugged, and set his tray down on the next table over. "There's a rumor going around," he replied matter-of-factly. "Everyone's saying Chief Hopper had a one-night stand with some woman thirteen years ago. While he was still *married*, even. And she had his secret lovechild, and never told him until recently."

"That's *horrible*, Greg!" Max bristled.

Eleven's eyes started to brim with tears. She looked down at her lunch tray, the helpless panic suddenly back again. It had been one thing to studiously ignore all of the anonymous taunting and muttering, but hearing confirmation that she was being talked about

in such a flippant and cruel manner by half the school was almost too much to bear. It was more terrifying, more overwhelming, more *devastating* than the Upside Down nightmare she'd woken from that morning. For a moment she considered withdrawing into the Void to free herself from it all.

Greg shrugged again. "Like I said, Mayfield, it's just a rumor. I'm letting y'all know so you're prepared for it. You guys don't deserve any more shit than you already get." He glanced at Will. "There's another rumor going around too, about Will's mom and the chief."

Will spluttered into his carton of milk, but didn't say anything.

El turned to Mike, her mind fighting against the distressing flow of thoughts. The last thing she needed right now was to have a full psychokinetic breakdown in front of everyone. All she wanted was to be alone with him. He saw the tearful look in her eyes and a flash of impotent fury coursed through his body.

"Great. Thanks for the heads-up, Greg," Mike said, barely managing to conceal the simmering rage in his voice. He could feel El trembling next to him.

"Anytime," Greg replied. He picked up his tray and made as if to leave, but then turned back to address Mike again. "Nice job scoring her, though. You two make a cute couple." He nodded one final time at El, and then he was on his merry way.

Mike watched him leave, then turned back to his friends. "Looks like people have been filling in the blanks a little *too* effectively," he said bitterly. He put his arm protectively around El and pulled her closer to him, suddenly not giving a damn who else in the cafeteria could be watching. She melted against him and gratefully rested her head on his shoulder.

"Wheeler, there's *nothing* we can really do about that," Max quietly commented. "Would you rather they all knew the *truth*?" Her eyes were full of concern as she rubbed El's arm supportively.

"The *truth* would probably hurt El a whole lot less," he bit out.

"But then it would ruin the chance of El ever having a normal sort of life," Dustin pointed out. "At least rumors die out after a while. People *always* find some other bullshit to talk about."

"Y-yeah. Maybe the... *other* rumor... about my mom and Hopper will overshadow this one about El," Will suggested. "After all the shit I've been through, I really don't care what people say about me and my family anymore."

Lucas grimaced. "Somehow I don't think so. Dustin's right. All we can do is give El the support she needs while we wait this out."

"But we can hope, right?" Will insisted.

"Of course we can," Max replied, jabbing her slowly congealing meatloaf with her fork for emphasis. "'Til then, we all gotta stand up for El no matter what. *We're her friends*, dammit!"

"Damn right," Dustin exclaimed. "El, who gives a shit what everybody else is saying! You deserve to be treated like the rest of us. We're gonna make that happen." The others briskly nodded their agreement.

Mike took a deep breath to calm himself, and turned to the girl he loved more than anything else in the entire universe, his free hand still grasping hers tenderly. He hoped beyond hope that their words could make a difference.

El lifted her head off Mike's shoulder and looked around the table. At all of her friends, and at their concerned, caring faces. It had been a long, torturous road to get to this point, but she knew the fire-forged bond they now shared made those words all the more sincere. *Friends don't lie.*

Bracing herself, she blinked the tears from her eyes. "Thank you," she murmured to her friends, repeating her mantra from earlier. "It's okay. Let the mouth breathers laugh." She set her lips firmly, and allowed herself a tiny, sad smile as a stray memory floated into her mind.

"I'm *your* friend, and I'm *crazy*," she quietly declared.

I was a bit reluctant to add more OC characters so in the end Greg was the one who had to reveal the awful gossip to Eleven and the rest of the gang. We don't get to see a lot of other interactions with their actual classmates, who are mostly relegated to background set pieces.

I'd also wanted to include Troy (the bully from Season 1) somewhere, but he moved on to high school during the events of Season 2 and isn't around to make life hell for Mike and the others anymore. In my headcanon he's still pretty wangsty about what Eleven did to him and it would have been fairly interesting if he'd bumped into her on the first day back at school.

OST inspiration for this chapter: *Eleven* (duh), *She'll Kill You*, *Friendship*, *Kids*, and of course *The Upside Down*.

9. We Had A Deal

A *very* brief interlude of Hopper in dad mode.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 7, 1985

We Had A Deal

*I'll never find another girl like you
For happy endings it takes two
We're fire and ice, the dream won't come true
Sara, Sara, storms are brewing in your eyes
Sara, Sara, no time is a good time for goodbyes
- Sara, Starship*

Hopper turned the corner and strode straight into Coleman's office, ignoring the shrill protests of the two hawkish administration ladies as he passed by their desk. He hoped his already rotten mood wouldn't darken even further.

"Ah. Chief Hopper. Back so soon?" The principal fixed him with a stare from behind a desk littered with knick-knacks, and gestured him towards an empty chair. The two had already crossed paths earlier, when he'd introduced Hopper and Eleven to her new tutor before class.

Hopper eased himself into the chair, realizing that this was the very same one he'd sat in, the day a certain kid named Michael Wheeler had been catapulted into his life. He figured it was fate that had brought him all the way back again. "Yeah," he replied shortly.

Coleman leaned forward in his seat and steepled his hands. "Did Jane get to her first class okay?"

"I made sure she got there safely." He'd waited patiently off to the side, murmuring words of encouragement to El when she'd grasped the door handle with a trembling hand, peering apprehensively through the small window into the classroom, observing the tumult

within. He'd watched and listened through the doorway from his vantage point as Mr. Clarke made his introductory spiel, and he'd only turned to leave once El had settled herself safely into the seat next to Wheeler. But all he could think about as he'd walked away down the echoing corridor was the disconcerting way in which the class had reacted to her arrival.

Now Hopper's eyes scanned the room methodically, finally coming to rest on the principal himself. "You know, I saw how those kids responded to my daughter when she walked into their class just now," he continued, his voice cooling a few degrees. "It wasn't pretty. Seems there's already been a whole load of *talk* happening about the place. *We had a deal*, Russell."

The principal looked slightly taken aback. "Jim, I can assure you neither myself nor any of my senior staff have breached any of our agreements," he said evenly. "Other than maybe five people, there's no one on this campus who knows anything about Jane beyond the fact that she's your daughter. Possibly not even that much."

"Yeah? Well you better find and reel in whoever's going round spreading shit, because it sure ain't *fair* on a thirteen year old girl who's been through *a lot* of trauma in her short life so far," he snapped.

Coleman held his palms up in appeal. "Please. I'm *really* sorry to hear that, but I think you might be jumping at shadows. It'll most likely be one or two bad eggs influencing the behavior of the rest. We can't be responsible for parents talking around their kids, or kids talking outside of school. It's a small town, and no doubt me and my staff are not the only people you've spoken to about Jane."

Hopper looked away. For a moment he wished he'd picked a different cover story for him and El. He'd been so sure he could weather any gossip that came his way, but hadn't quite accounted for the effect it would have on her, or Wheeler, or any of their friends. He rubbed his temples in irritation, realizing that Coleman's words were almost a mirror of what he'd said to Mike at breakfast that morning.

"If you're beginning to doubt my sincerity, Jim, you know we could have blown this whole thing wide open a year ago," Coleman

continued pointedly. He lowered his voice and leaned closer to Hopper. "We could have *easily* let the whole Will Byers saga spiral out of control after those lab spooks showed up and wrecked half my god damn school. But the mere fact you and I are sitting here having this chat right now is an indicator I'm still holding up my end of the bargain."

"You've got my thanks for that. But I *can't* just let you sit by and do nothing about this." Hopper sighed and scratched his beard. "My daughter... Jane... she's *not* like other thirteen year olds, Russell. You *don't* wanna find out what could happen if she gets pushed over the edge. You, and me, and her, we all don't wanna be back here in this office again a day or two from now trying to deal with the fallout if that *situation* arises." He jabbed a finger downwards for emphasis.

Coleman considered things for a moment. "I could speak to Jane and her friends about how to handle the taunting and the rumors, or perhaps arrange for Scott Clarke to do it. He seems to have struck up a good rapport with the group."

"Go on..."

"But the moment we make a big deal out of it to the entire faculty, Jane will suffer even worse taunting," the principal warned. "Rumors have a short lifespan. Better to let them die out of their own accord than pour fuel on that fire by acknowledging them." He allowed himself a small smile. "Jim, many a worried parent has crossed my door asking the same thing. It's *nice* seeing you finally rejoin their ranks. You may feel like we're letting the culprits get away scot free, but *this* is the best way to deal with it. Trust me on this one, okay?"

Hopper nodded slowly, surprised by Coleman's easy grace. He carefully mulled over the principal's suggestion, memories of his beloved Sara hovering at the edge of his mind. *I thought I could save her. I didn't want to lose her.* Slowly the old memories gave way to those of the girl he'd grown to love and care for over the past year. *You've got your second chance. With El. She's going to have to grow up and grow old sometime.* He figured maybe he'd stop by Melvald's on the way back to the station, maybe chat with Joyce, maybe see if she had any further insight for him.

"Y'know, Russell, you're right. I guess I'm being a little overprotective. Getting used to this whole dad thing again," Hop finally replied, with a sheepish grin of his own. "I'm glad I came to see you about it anyway."

Coleman chuckled. "Yes, me too." He bowed his head and continued, "I'm sorry we never got to meet your Sara. From what I hear, she would have made a great student. We'll do our best for Jane though."

Anyone find it fitting that (Jefferson) Starship released two top 20 songs called *Jane* and *Sara*?

10. Afternoon Recess

Warning, more smut ahead. If you haven't already seen it, parts of this chapter and the two previous ones form the basis of the 'alternate ending' standalone story called 'The Dark Inside Her'.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 7, 1985

Afternoon Recess

*Oh, I think that you're wild
And so uniquely styled
You might think it's foolish
This chancy rendezvous
You might think I'm crazy
But all I want is you
- **You Might Think**, The Cars*

A noticeable heaviness hung in the air as fifth period dragged on and on. The lethal combination of mid-afternoon dullness and post-holiday blues was really making itself felt amongst the students in Eleven's class.

Either that or the lunchtime meatloaf had really hit the mark.

El squirmed restlessly in her chair, not actually listening as the math teacher droned endlessly on in the background. Geometry, probability, scatter plots. All kinds of boring stuff she sort of knew about, but didn't really care for right now. She risked a glance across the row at Max, whose head was propped up in one hand as she gazed disinterestedly off into space. El looked back down at her notebook, and sighed inaudibly as her mind flashed back to the previous Thursday's study session. The two girls had tried covering almost the exact same topics that day, and they'd found it extremely hard to concentrate, just like now.

She squirmed again and stretched her legs as another topic from last Thursday popped into her mind. One that was more than just a teeny

bit naughty, and made her heart beat a little faster even as the boredom threatened to overwhelm her. *Are you and Mike...?* Her loins started tingling at all the delicious imagery. *We're just fooling around.* She'd wanted to *fool around* with Mike when they'd woken up today, but Hopper had roused them for school before anything could happen.

El chewed on her lip, thinking furiously. If she remembered correctly, after fifth period came recess, which meant a chance to be alone with Mike! An idea formed in her mind and she started scribbling on her notebook page, a warm flush spreading across her cheeks as she did.

Mike had given up on the math lesson the moment he'd sat down, and was now as bored and listless as everyone else, looking forward for recess to start so he could be with Eleven again. He ran his hands tiredly through his shaggy mop of hair and yearned desperately for her touch. They'd spent the entire school day thus far separated by *one* desk width; so painfully close yet so far away, and unable to do anything about it except sneak cute looks at each other.

He'd hoped for some quiet time with El during lunch, but McCorkle's disturbing revelations had left the entire gang in a gloomy mood, and they'd all huddled together in the AV room for the remainder of the break discussing various ways to handle the situation. Unfortunately none of their ideas seemed to amount to anything even remotely effective, and the six of them had resigned themselves to Dustin's original plan of letting the rumors die out naturally. That had definitely put a damper on their whole afternoon.

The teacher turned to write something on the blackboard, and in Mike's peripheral vision he saw a note suddenly appear on the edge of his desk. He fumbled to grab it, and his eyes widened once he'd surreptitiously unfolded it and read El's simple but compelling words.

Mike glanced to his right and their eyes met briefly in acknowledgment. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck shiver as El gave him one of her warm dimple-faced smiles, then they both settled back and waited for class to finish, their earlier boredom now replaced by a new and burning anticipation.

Finally, after what seemed like a small eternity the recess bell rang.

Mike and El stood up and nodded to each other microscopically.

"Uhhh... we'll meet you guys in the AV room," Mike said to the others, smoothly dropping the key on Dustin's desk as he and El quickly filed past.

Dustin looked up in confusion. "Wha..." he started to say, but the couple had already disappeared into the throng of kids leaving the room. He glanced around at his friends for support but found none. Will was studiously packing his books away, avoiding all eye contact. Max had a sly grin on her face as she gazed at Lucas. Lucas had a resigned look on *his* as he gazed back at Max. None of them seemed to be paying any more attention to El and Mike's sudden departure.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. *Oh my god.*" Dustin cradled his head in his hands as realization finally dawned on him.

Eleven led Mike excitedly down an endless maze of hallways with skilled grace, heading away from the more well-traversed areas of the school until they came upon a nondescript door set into the wall between two empty Home Economics classrooms. "How... how did you even know how to get here?" he asked El wondrously as she steered him towards it.

"Walking in the Upside Down," she answered him simply. She'd wandered up and down every echoing corridor, opening countless doors, peering into every nook and cranny, all in her initial desperate quest to find a way to leave that horrible place. "After the Demogorgon. After *Papa*. After they *went away*... I hid... here for a while." For all she'd known at the time, the Demogorgon could easily have been one of many others lurking within the nightmare world. She hadn't been totally sure of Brenner's demise, either.

Mike stopped short in the middle of the corridor. *Goodbye, Mike*. His heart ached for his girlfriend as he remembered back to that fateful night.

El saw the downcast expression on his face, sensed his bleak thoughts. She lightly touched his face and continued, "But... I *came back*. We're together now. I won't leave you again. *Promise.*"

Mike blinked and pulled himself away from the dark precipice in his mind. "Oh, El..." was all he could say.

She pushed him eagerly towards the door. "C'mon..."

He looked around to make sure the corridor around them was totally deserted as El unlocked the door with a quick flick of her curls, took his hand and pulled him into the snug little closet. She hit the lightswitch, shut the door, and the lock flipped closed. In one smooth motion they shrugged off their backpacks and jackets into two neat piles on the floor. Mike's anguish faded away as their lips met and locked solidly together, hands fumbling passionately over each other again.

"Ohhh... my... god... El... I... missed... this..." Mike gasped in between each furious kiss. El moaned seductively in acknowledgement, and kept edging him backwards until he butted up against something metal and solid. Their mouths separated one last time, and El moved towards his ear, biting and licking it greedily. She continued peppering kisses down his neck and got onto her knees, sliding her hands down his shirt to his bulging crotch.

Mike looked away as he felt El's hands tug at his zipper, finally noticing what it was he'd bumped into. It was one of the school's industrial grade dishwashing units. Then El's hot little mouth closed around his cock and he didn't care anymore.

"OhhhmygggoddEl!!!," he grunted loudly, looking down at the stunning girl bobbing her head lovingly on his erect cock. He arched his back in pleasure as she slowed and withdrew it from her mouth, grasping it gently in one hand, gazing wordlessly up at him. The irresistible look in El's warm brown eyes almost made him erupt then and there, and it took every ounce of self-control he had not to cum all over her gorgeous face.

"Been waiting since *six-zero-zero* to do that," El purred back at him innocently. She could sense the mesmerizing effect her behavior was having on her boyfriend, and couldn't resist teasing him a little more. She closed her eyes and tantalizingly licked her lips, the same action she'd once seen a character on her favorite soap opera perform with an ice cream cone.

"You are *such* a tease," Mike murmured. He reached down, and pulled El back onto her feet, spinning themselves around so now her back was to the wall. "But before you get too... *carried away*... with me..." He trailed off awkwardly.

El touched Mike's face again, tracing patterns across her boyfriend's adorable freckles, astonished at how gorgeously goofy he could be sometimes. "Yes. Make me feel good?" she whispered back. He nodded meekly.

She giggled breathlessly at the comical sight of him stumbling around the tiny room with his corduroys around his ankles. He grabbed awkwardly for his jacket, and plopped it unceremoniously on top of the dishwasher. "Here. Scoot up on this," he panted. Eleven complied by hoisting herself skillfully up onto the padded surface and rested her head against the wall. Her white Converse gripped the edge of the dishwasher and she drew her knees up and parted her legs in anticipation of what was to come next.

Mike lifted El's cute stripey blouse over her knees and up above her waist, once again gaping in amazement at the soaking wet patch on her panties. He self-consciously wondered how a nerd like him could even be capable of turning on such a beautiful girl as her. *Stop that.* He shook his head to clear the anxiety. *You know she loves you for who you are.* His fingers traced over El's flawless inner thighs and finally took hold of her waistband. El shuffled forward to the edge of the dishwasher and let him peel her panties down her legs and completely off.

Now it was her turn to gasp when the smoldering heat between her thighs exploded into a full-on inferno once Mike's exploring fingers began playing with her swollen pussy lips. "Ohhh! Yes Mike! Like that..." she panted, drawing in a series of shuddering breaths. She lifted her feet into the air, moved her hands under her legs, and suggestively pulled herself open even wider for him. One of Mike's fingers experimentally caressed her little pink rosebud and she jerked like she'd just been stung. "M-Mike! What... what was *that*?" she gulped. Through the haze in her mind she figured Aunt Joyce had left yet *another* minor detail out of their little talk before the Snow Ball. "That's... *so naughty*... no, *don't stop!*"

Mike submitted obediently, tracing lazy circles around El's tight little pucker while he let his mouth explore every exquisite fold and crevice of her steamy pussy. Her gasps took on a more frantic note, and she began bucking herself wildly against him. She slipped one finger inside herself, then two, shuddering every time Mike brushed against them. The added stimulation was now almost too much for her to handle and she began collapsing sideways. Then his tongue began flicking against her clit over and over again, and she knew she'd just crested that glorious wave.

The lightbulb above the two teens flickered sharply, and a drop of red glistened under El's nose. She had to bite down hard to stop herself from crying out at the top of her voice, settling for a long, drawn out whimper that ended as a forceful expulsion of air from her lungs. Her psychic wail slowly reverberated around Mike's mind instead, like rolling thunder on a warm summer's day.

Mike didn't budge until he was certain that all he could hear was the sound of El's satisfied panting combined with his own frenzied heartbeat. Her pussy gleamed wetly in the dim light as he moved away from it reluctantly, still tasting her unique flavor on his tongue. Their eyes met and she gave him a weak, but no less than dazzling smile. "*Happy*," she whispered.

He gave her one of his goofy grins in return, and their mouths came together in another fervent kiss.

Then El started to giggle as she felt something warm and hard rub against her leg. "Mike?" She tilted her head downwards.

He frowned and followed her gaze, and began giggling uncontrollably himself. "Oh, *bother*." His laughter quickly turned into a moan of pleasure when he felt her hand close around it. El's doe-like eyes reflected nothing but eagerness when he looked into them again. She hoisted herself elegantly off the dishwasher and landed on the floor beside him with a quiet thud, causing him to yelp in surprise. She wrinkled her nose at him, and teasingly pressed a finger against her lips.

Quick as a flash she dropped to her knees once more, and then there was *something else* pressed against those very same lips. Mike's jaw

fell open. "Hnnngff...!" He stumbled backwards, but somehow managed to brace himself against the dishwasher.

He hissed and sucked in a breath through clenched teeth as El went to town on him with reckless impunity. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod," he stammered when she used one hand to jerk the base of his cock while swirling her tongue around the rest of its length.

El moaned around her mouthful of his manhood, enjoying the risqué way the vibrations made him squirm and shudder. She stared up at him hungrily, wanting to make him feel as good with her mouth as he'd made her feel with his.

"Shitohshitohshit," he gasped when she pulled his cock back out of her mouth and started licking it like a lollipop. *Or an ice cream cone.* Her motions slowed briefly, then she began to rapidly flick her tongue across his tip the same way he'd done against her clit moments earlier. He exhaled in huge groans, desperately repeating her name over and over again with each breath, trying to warn her, but it was too late.

A warm surge of cum splashed all over El's lips and nose, unintentionally making her squeal and squeeze her eyes tightly shut, but she had enough sense to take him back into her mouth before he could make a giant mess everywhere. She held his cock in one hand and waited for his rapid twitching to subside before she released him with a wet and satisfying pop. She looked up at him with a conclusive smirk, cheekily wiping her face with sticky fingers, and he responded by running his hands tenderly through her curly hair.

El clambered off the floor onto suddenly wobbly legs and attempted to pull her sodden panties back on. She erupted into another fit of giggling as she struggled to maintain her balance, clinging on to Mike for dear life. She felt like she'd been on her knees for way too long.

"Shhh, El! Someone might hear us!" Mike teased. He waited until she was modest again before clumsily pulling his own pants and briefs back up, then retrieved his jacket from on top of the dishwasher and tried to ignore the very large and very obvious wet spot as he stuffed it quickly into his backpack.

El picked up her satchel and smoothed down her dress. "How do I look?"

"Still pretty," Mike sighed.

He grabbed the door handle and waited for El to trip the lock.

The door swung open and the couple froze in complete shock. They weren't alone in the hallway.

A boy Mike barely even knew was edging towards them with an odd look on his face. "Hey, it's the *retard!* Chief's retard kid!" he sneered at El. "What the hell were you doing in there with her, *frogface?*"

Mike held his hands out in a placating gesture, heart thumping as he tried his hardest not to bite back at the other boy's seething insults. "Hey. *Back off*, man. No need for that. It's her first day and I'm just showing her round school, alright?"

"Oh so you were giving her a tour of the *janitor's closet?* Nice try, Wheeler. Troy always said you were a loser creep." The boy edged even closer to the couple, peering suspiciously at their flushed, breathless faces, tousled hair and slightly rumpled clothing. "Word around the place is you and her *hooked up* at the Snow Ball. Looks like I just caught you at it again!"

"*Shut the hell up!*" Mike yelled, the panic rising in his chest. "I don't even know you!" His head ached as he realized how close to the mark the bully's words had been.

"Oh yeah? Everybody knows who *you* are! You, and zombie boy, and those *other* AV club wastoids! And now retard girl too. What's *this* supposed to be, some sort of filthy initiation ceremony?" The boy's eyes glinted maliciously.

Mike shot a desperate sideways glance at Eleven. *Please let me handle this*, he mouthed at her. Their eyes met again briefly and he was surprised to see the steely resolve in her expression. Then to his complete and utter surprise, she took a step forward and took hold of his hand firmly.

"No. Mike is my *boyfriend*. What does it matter?" she hissed at the

other boy defiantly.

The bully's eyes widened, and his aggressive front faltered. "Wha... you... you can *talk*?"

"Of course. Now **leave us alone**," she shot back. "And I'm *not* a retard. You go tell your *mouth breather* friends."

The other boy's face contorted in anger, but he must have spotted something simmering in El's eyes that made him hesitate. "Wait 'til the whole school hears about this. Chief Hopper's lovechild and frogface Wheeler hooked up during *school time*," he jeered instead. He glared in revulsion at each of their faces, at their hands tightly clasped together, then pushed his way roughly past Mike and stomped on down the hallway.

Eleven watched the boy go, silently willing herself not to use her powers to trip him up for the sheer fun of it. She settled for making him jump in terror instead by furiously slamming the closet door shut with a vicious twist of her head.

Mike squeezed her hand in quiet consolation and turned to slip his arms around her. They melted together in a longing, reassuring embrace, waiting for the tension and the adrenaline to fade.

"Maybe people will talk about this instead," El murmured sadly into Mike's chest. "Doesn't *hurt* as much when it's *true*."

Next chapter is a timeskip back to Christmas.

11. Channel Eleven

Fluff, fluff, fluff everywhere. I got a bit emotional writing this one.

IMPLIED JOPPER INTENSIFIES

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 25, 1984

Channel Eleven

Something happens and I'm head over heels
I never find out 'til I'm head over heels
Something happens and I'm head over heels
Ah, don't take my heart, don't break my heart
Don't, don't, don't throw it away
- **Head Over Heels**, Tears for Fears

"El? Before you call Wheeler, there's something we need to talk to you about. Something *really* important."

Eleven paused her careful examination of her shiny new Supercom, and looked up at Hopper. She silently handed the device over to Will and scooted herself up onto the couch next to Aunt Joyce and her adoptive father.

"Wow, the High Power even has *twelve* channels! Our regular Supercoms only have three," Will exclaimed to nobody in particular, and wandered off to the kitchen in search of batteries for the thing. El watched him go, then turned to look between Joyce and Hopper expectantly.

Hopper ruffled his daughter's curls affectionately, and took a deep breath. "El? Remember this morning, when I promised we'd work on this whole Mike thing?"

Eleven nodded, her eyes lighting up at the mention of her boyfriend's name once again. "Yes!"

"Well, we need to have a good talk about that now. Some *new rules*. It's all to do with integrating back into the real world." Hopper tugged on his beard in contemplation of how to proceed. Teenagers definitely weren't his area of expertise. "See, uhh, we can't really have you going around telling people you came from that horrible laboratory. So Aunt Joyce and me, we've come up with a more normal background story for you."

El nodded again. As much as she disliked it whenever Hopper started talking about *new rules*, she had an inkling that these wouldn't be nearly as draconian as his previous ones. She'd also decided long ago that even if she didn't follow said rules to the letter every time, they were still a useful way for her to gauge her boundaries, free from the shackles of the laboratory.

"What is 'background'?" she asked innocently.

"It's like, the story of where you came from. Who your mom and your dad are. How you came to Hawkins and met all of us," Will explained as he plopped himself back down on the rug in front of El. "So you don't *ever* need to mention the lab if anyone asks."

"You remember your Aunt Becky?" Hopper asked. Eleven gave him another nod, but there was a quick flash of fear in her eyes. "Don't worry, I gave her back the money you took," he added hastily. "Aunt Becky came to see me last week. We had a good long talk, and she agreed that I would adopt you officially." He'd showed her the certificate Dr. Owens had prepared, and promised that he'd bring El back to visit in the future. "If it helps, kid, I *don't* think she's mad at you. I think she's glad you and Mama can finally connect again. Maybe she'll come see you more often now. And maybe we can take you to go see Mama too."

El studied her adoptive father, biting her lip in concentration. She wondered if she should tell them about her adventure to Chicago to find Eight, but decided it would probably be a story best saved for the future. "*Mama*," she whispered instead.

Hopper sighed deeply. "You can tell anyone who ever asks, that Mama got *really sick* and couldn't look after you anymore." He looked wistfully at his adoptive daughter. "And you can tell them that you..."

you never knew I was your father. Until now. And so you came to Hawkins to live with me." He'd run over this script a thousand times in his mind, but it still felt odd to be finally saying the words.

One of El's oft-repeated mantras floated into his mind: *Friends don't lie*. He fervently hoped that the cover story he'd cooked up with Joyce's help still counted as the truth.

"Remember how Mama gave you a real name when you were born? She called you *Jane*," Aunt Joyce said, picking up the next thread of the tale. "Out there in the world, all the other adults and kids will call you Jane too. But to us, and all your friends, you can still be *El*, short for *Eleven*, if you choose."

"But sometimes we'll have to call you Jane as well," Hopper chimed in.

"Usually when other people are nearby," Will added helpfully.

"*Jane*," Eleven repeated. "Still a pretty name. Jane... *Hopper*." She gave them a little dimple-faced smile that managed to be both sad and joyous at the same time. "That means... Sara is my *sister*."

Hopper's eyes began to tear up as the emotions threatened to overwhelm him, and he had to turn his face away from the others briefly. In a slightly shaky voice he managed to continue, "It's... it's *really* important that you stick to this story, El. Think of it as our new **rule number one**, okay?" He trailed off and looked between all three of them in turn, blinking rapidly to clear his vision.

El grabbed her father's hand and squeezed it gladly. "Dad? *Yes!* I will!" she agreed. Her heart fluttered as she pondered what Hopper, Joyce, and Will had just explained to her. She hoped that she wouldn't let them down. A part of her felt excited beyond measure at the prospect of finally being able to mingle with other people. *Out there in the world. Other adults and kids*. To live a life of relative normalcy as Chief Jim Hopper's daughter. *To be with her beloved Mike*. But another, darker part of her soul remained apprehensive. Years of cruel treatment in the lab had robbed her of any real ability to gauge people's sincerity, and she still wasn't entirely sure how everybody else would behave towards her. She guessed she would start finding

out very soon.

Joyce reached over and put her arm around Hopper as he struggled to compose himself. He sagged against her in response and for a moment there was silence in the cabin.

"Alright," Hopper finally said, once he felt he could talk again without choking up. "**Rule number two.** And this one's really important as well." He settled his hands tenderly on his daughter's shoulders and fixed her with his best police chief stare. "Never, and I mean *never* use your powers to hurt *anybody* out in the world. Not even if they deserve it." He figured that she'd end up using her powers in other ways regardless, and setting one very clear boundary was better than telling her not to use them at all. "If you get into *any* trouble, try and resolve the situation *without* violence. And you know you can always talk to me, or Wheeler, or Aunt Joyce, or Will, or any of your other friends about such things."

Will nodded in agreement. "Me, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, even Max too! We'll always be here for you, El."

"Thanks, kid." Hopper turned his attention back to Eleven. "Okay? Rule number two. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes. Deal," El replied. "Don't use my powers to hurt anybody. Not even the mouth breathers."

"Good. That's real good, kid." Hopper gave his daughter's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Next comes **rule number three and four.** They concern all your friends, and Mike too."

El nodded, her wide brown eyes shining hopefully.

"Now that winter holidays have started, Aunt Joyce and me have reached an agreement with the other parents that you can go to their houses whenever your friends decide to meet up. Maybe even the arcade too," Hopper continued. "But we *don't* want you wandering around Hawkins alone, and you need to stay with the others *at all times*. Got it? Don't go anywhere *without* any of your friends, or one of us. That means me, Aunt Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy... and Steve, too." He'd been impressed in spite of himself when he'd heard about Steve's

new-found fatherly instincts, and figured the Harrington boy would be as fiercely protective of El as he was of the others.

"And you don't have to stay here in the cabin all the time either," Aunt Joyce affirmed. "You can come to our house *anytime*, El. And of course you'll always be welcome at Mike's." She gestured at El's Supercom. "You'll get to talk to him about it very soon."

Hopper chewed his lip. "Dr. Owens told me to give it a year to play it safe, but I think we can get you back out there sooner than that. Remember the doctor we met in the stairwell back at the lab, the one with the injured leg? He *wasn't a bad man* after all. He... helped us. Kept his word. So we need to make sure you keep yours." He touched El's face in a fatherly gesture, and she melted against him gratefully.

"Yes, Dad. I will." The scratchy fabric of Hop's sweater tickled El's cheek and she nuzzled against him softly. "And... Mike?" she added, her heart starting to beat faster.

Hopper braced himself, aware of the others in the room. "I *promised* that I won't stand between you and Mike. You two were meant for each other, I know that now. We *all* know that." He paused and took a calming breath. "Aunt Joyce gave you a talk. You now have some idea of what happens when two people love each other very much. I-I *won't* stop you and Mike from exploring your love for each other. But I *need* your promise... that you'll play it safe with him. People in love sometimes do *stupid* things." He finally broke off, hoping they couldn't see how red his face was getting. *Almost as red as Will's*, he figured, eyeing the other boy sitting patiently on the rug. *Poor kid, he probably feels like a fifth wheel right now.*

Fortunately Aunt Joyce came to the rescue. She touched El's sleeve gently. "El, when you're ready, we'll have *another* talk. But please make sure you and Mike talk things over too. He's a smart kid, and I know he'd *never* hurt you. *You're* a smart kid too, despite all you've been through. But don't force Mike or yourself to do anything you *don't* feel you're ready for. Okay?" Her eyes were full of concern as they flicked between the chief and his daughter.

El nodded as she once again considered the weighty statement her father and Joyce had just handed down. The recollections from that

momentous day after the Snow Ball flashed into her mind and a warm glow crept between her thighs. She weighed up all of the delightful things her and Mike had done to each other that morning, firmly deciding that she was *more* than satisfied with what they shared right now. She began to look confidently forward to what lay ahead in their future. *Together*. "Okay. I-I promise to play it safe," she whispered to them, and meant it with all her heart.

Hopper put his arm around his daughter in satisfaction, all of the tension finally draining out of his body. "That's it, kiddo. Four new rules for you to play it safe out in the world." He squeezed her emotionally and gratefully. "For now," he teased.

El melted against her father again, and silence descended over the little cabin once more. For a long while all the four of them could hear was the merry crackling of the logs on the fire.

Hopper finally stirred and stretched suddenly aching muscles. He yawned solidly as he got up off the couch. "Well... all this serious dad business makes me thirsty. Anyone else want some eggnog?"

Joyce's eyes twinkled as she followed him towards the kitchen. "That would be divine, Hop, but Will and I better get going so I have a chance to put together *our* Christmas dinner." She made sure the kids weren't looking, turned to him and mouthed the words *six thirty, don't be late*.

Hopper cracked a lopsided smile at her.

"In a minute, Mom!" Will declared over his shoulder. "El? I loaded some batteries into your Supercom, and set it to channel eleven so you and Mike can communicate." He handed it back to her with a shy smile and pointed to the channel selector on the front. "Slide this button over to channel two if you ever want to talk to the rest of us, as long as you're in range. I'm *sooo* jealous of you and Mike, but also *sooo* happy at the same time."

El nodded and gave him a warm dimpled smile in return. "Thank you, Will. I... I hope to see more of you and the others. After Christmas."

"Yeah! We'll all go hang out at Mike's during the holidays. Dustin

wants to play one of his D&D campaigns," he beamed, shrugging on his coat. "The others are looking forward to it too. Maybe we can even go sledding behind Mike's house before the snow melts. And once it's safer for you to be out in public, Jonathan and Nancy said they'll take us to the movies!"

"Merry Christmas. We'll see you again soon, El. Or Jane. *Whichever* you prefer," Joyce proclaimed as her and Hopper walked up beside the two teens, and the four of them melted together into a heartfelt and comforting group hug by the door.

"Thank you Joyce and Will, for helping make our first Christmas together one to remember," Hopper murmured sincerely. His eyes were getting misty again.

Eleven flopped onto her bed, clutching her brand new Supercom to her chest as she stared up at the ceiling, her heart and mind awash with excitement. She moved the walkie talkie up to her mouth, fingers suddenly trembling as she flicked the On switch and hit Transmit for the very first time.

"M-Mike? Are you there? Mike? It's... it's *me*. It's El. Over," the teenage girl stammered into the mouthpiece, making sure to sign off her radio transmission the same way she'd heard the boys do it.

For a long moment there was nothing but silence, and El's heart began to sink as a hundred possible scenarios played through her mind. *Maybe... he doesn't want to talk to me after all?*

Then there was an answering crackle, and to her joy and relief she heard Mike's breathless voice reverberate through the tinny speaker. "E-El! You... you finally called! Hopper did it. He *actually* did it. Over."

"Did *what*, Mike? Over."

"He got you your very own Supercom! So we can talk now." Mike's voice took on a mournful tone. "Oh El, I've missed you. It's... it's been *nine days*," he breathed. "Nine days without your touch. Without your *voice*. Over."

El squeezed her eyes shut tearfully. She focused her mind and reached out through the Void, channeling all of her energy towards the boy she loved. An image formed in her mind's eye. Way way off in the distance, in the middle of the choking inky blackness, she could just barely make out a shape.

Mike.

"Better than *353 days*, Mike. I... I'm here now. Missed you too. Over," she heard herself say.

Back in the Void, she began walking towards the far-off object. The ground rippled like water with every step she took.

"Did you... get my other note? Over," he asked her hopefully.

"The one in the box. Yes," she whispered excitedly. "See you at dinner? Over."

She heard the quiet excitement in her boyfriend's voice. "It... it would be an honor, my beloved mage. Over."

"*Mage and Paladin*," she murmured in recognition. "Dad... Hopper said he'll drop me off at six-zero-zero. Over."

"I can't wait! Mom's busy right now making like *three* different kinds of roast. You're going to need to save some room for dessert too. And *guess what?*" The trepidation in his voice grew even more intense. "Hop and Mom and Dad all said *you can stay the night!* Over."

El squealed in elation. "Oh Mike!" she exclaimed. "I... I... that is so *bitchin'!* Over." She was getting closer to him in the Void, and she could now see him sitting cross-legged in their blanket fort, Supercom pressed eagerly to his ear, listening to her lilting voice.

She kept walking, and finally, there he was. Clear as day, right in front of her.

"Yeah! We can play board games, or put on some cheesy movies and cuddle in the fort. Or if you want, we could... fool around again? We can do *anything* you like. Over." El caught the naughty inflection in his voice, and saw the blush spreading across his adorable face.

She shivered at all of the delectable thoughts. "Mike? Close your eyes. Over."

For another long moment there was silence. Then, in the Void, El saw Mike's eyes close, and flutter open again sharply. He gasped in surprise and his head tilted upwards as he finally noticed her standing in front of him. His finger stabbed at the Transmit button.

"El? I can... *see* you. You're here. *Right here*, in front of me!" his amazed response crackled into her mind. Then understanding hit him. "You... you're using your powers? Over."

Back in her bedroom across town, El's corporeal form twitched. "Yes," she whispered. "Can't... stay for much longer. Over." She could feel the vitality and the blood steadily leeching out of her, but with the boy she loved *right there* in front of her, her body continued fighting the growing blackness with steely determination. She sat down before him, and reached out uneasily, hoping that he wouldn't vanish into a puff of smoke like the thousand other projections she'd constructed before.

Mike didn't vanish. Instead he blinked and his voice took on a sense of urgent panic. "Please! El! *Don't* hurt yourself for the sake of finding me in the Void," he cried. His free hand found hers, and caressed her soft skin gently. "We'll be together again very soon. *For real*. Promise. Over."

"Mike..." she began to say, but he put a finger to her lips.

"Rest now, El. Please. I'll see you soon. I... I *love* you. Over and out." His image finally blew away like leaves in the Indiana fall.

"I love *you* more. Over and out." The Supercom slipped from Eleven's hand, and she found herself sliding into a deep, restful sleep.

For once, she *didn't* dream of the Upside Down.

Some time later, Hopper looked up from the book he was reading at the sound of El's bedroom door squeaking open. He focused on her intently as she walked blissfully out into the living area, and grinned in spite of himself. "Ready to go see Wheeler, kid?" His grin

deepened. "Did he tell you that you could stay the night?"

El had never been more ready in her life. "Yes! Thank you for letting me!" she squealed excitedly, and rushed off to grab her jacket and pack some things into her overnight bag.

"Don't forget Wheeler's present!" Hopper reminded her playfully. El had carefully written up a list of presents to give to all her friends, and he and Joyce had spent an afternoon at Starcourt collecting and carefully wrapping them all. He'd sent all of the other gifts away for Joyce and Will to distribute, but he'd kept Mike's one especially for Eleven to give to him in person.

He stooped, and started pulling his boots on. *Best Christmas ever*, he repeated softly to himself.

Eleven skipped merrily down the driveway of the Wheelers' house, leading her father by the hand behind her, and bounced to a breathless halt at the front door. She rang the doorbell and waited, barely able to conceal her excitement despite the cold.

Finally, the door opened to reveal Mike's adorable gangly form. *Her boyfriend*. El's heart fluttered. She'd seen and touched him in the Void barely hours earlier, but nothing could beat seeing him right there, for real.

"Uhhh... hi," Mike gushed nervously, blushing as he drank in the sight of the gorgeous brunette standing in front of him. *His girlfriend*. "You... you look good." He fidgeted as he caught Hopper's steely gaze.

"Hi Mike," El replied sweetly. "Merry Christmas!" She held out his present.

Mike's eyes lit up as he accepted her gift. "Thank you El. Merry Christmas!" He gestured invitingly towards the sitting room. "I-I got you something too. It's under the tree. P-please... come in."

Eleven turned to Hopper, still waiting patiently behind her on the Wheelers' doorstep. "Bye, Dad," she said quietly, wrapping her arms around his torso, pressing herself against him tightly in a warm hug.

"Are you... going *home*?" She really hoped her father wouldn't spend the rest of Christmas night moping alone in the freezing cold cabin.

Hop looked down and gave her a small smile. "No, kid. I'm going over to Aunt Joyce's for dinner. She makes the *best* mashed potatoes," he said with a wink. "We'll be there until tomorrow if you need us." He gently spun her back around to face Mike, and nodded sternly at him.

"Have a good evening, Chief. Sir," Mike said as he took El's hand tenderly. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Wheeler," Hop replied, tipping his hat goodbye. "I'll be back to collect El in the morning. Don't do anything stupid."

And with that, he was off once more into the chilly winter night.

I really hope Aunt Becky is back in a future season. I like to think she's not mad at El for skipping out on her, and would love the chance to reconnect with her lost niece.

The Christmas Day plot thread isn't over yet :)

12. Blanket Fort

omg the HUMOR and FLUFF and ANGST are turned all the way up to *mileven* in this chapter.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 25, 1984

Blanket Fort

*But I still choose
The comfort in finding you
But you can't fail to see
Anything but me
And the world that we make
When it falls into place*
- ***Eastern Leaves***, Moving Mountains

Dessert had been served complete with lashings of root beer and ice cream, Mike and Eleven had left their gifts by the tree with a chaste kiss under the mistletoe, and Ted was asleep in his Lay-Z-Boy again. All that remained was the simple task of cleaning up after the Wheelers' epic Christmas dinner.

Mike had volunteered himself and Eleven to help with the dishes despite his mother's protestations that they didn't have to, and now they stood by the sink busy scrubbing, rinsing, and stacking the dishwasher while Karen and Nancy bustled around them tidying away the remnants of the delicious feast they'd all shared earlier in the evening.

"Every Christmas this *always* happens. We'll be eating like kings and queens for a week," Nancy was saying as she carved off some giant chunks of roast meat to squeeze into the equally giant collection of Tupperware containers that littered the breakfast bar. "Jane, you're definitely going to have to take some home for Hopper tomorrow. Just don't let him forget and leave it in the fridge for *weeks*. Mike did that once with some leftovers, and I'm pretty sure they grew legs."

"Ewww Nance, that's gross," Mike protested. "Besides, I think Dad still ate them anyway." He handed another plate to El.

Karen Wheeler chuckled. "That's a great idea, Nancy. We've got more than enough to go around." She stopped next to the teens and put her hands on her hips in mock annoyance. "You two know you don't have to help, right?"

"Mom! Don't worry! You've been on your feet all day getting things ready. Go and relax," Mike replied.

"Oh pish, Michael. A mother's work is never done." Karen focused on Eleven, and gave her a warm motherly smile. "It was *such* a delight having you over for Christmas dinner tonight, Jane. I really hope this will be the first of many to come." She chuckled again as she caught the blush starting to spread on Mike's face.

"Thank you Mrs. Wheeler. It was very nice," El replied shyly. In fact, *nice* couldn't even begin to describe it. *Heavenly* would have been more apt. El's first Christmas ever had gone from strength to strength with every passing hour, to the point where she'd almost forgotten that she'd begun that magical day crying into her pillow at the prospect of enduring another lonely stint without seeing Mike.

"Oh, you are most welcome! Mike had something to do with it too, so I won't take all the credit," Karen exclaimed. She indicated the pots and pans still cluttering the counter, and made a shooing motion. "Right, leave those to me. You two scam now. You've still got presents to open, remember?"

"Ohh! Yes," Mike exclaimed. He turned to his girlfriend and tenderly clasped her hands in his. "S-shall we?" he stammered.

Now it was El's turn to blush, and she nodded, giving him that cute little smile of hers which always made his heart flutter.

"Ah, but let me just go get my camera first," Karen proclaimed heartily over her shoulder as she quickly made her way out of the kitchen.

"**MOOOOM!**" Mike slumped his shoulders in response to his mother's

words, causing both El and Nancy to giggle at his very clear and very pronounced agitation.

"C'mon little brother, you know it's always easier just to let Mom bask in the moment," Nancy said to him with a wink. She stepped closer to the couple. "You really need to loosen up, Mike. She means the best for you both!"

Mike pouted back at the girls. "Ugh, the fuss she makes is *so annoying*. You should have seen Mom do this to me before the Snow Ball, El." He rolled his eyes when El wouldn't stop giggling, but led her out to the sitting room anyway.

Their presents were still under the tree from when they'd left them there earlier. Mike retrieved El's carefully wrapped gift as Karen and Nancy walked into the sitting room with barely concealed excitement. He turned to her with a sudden quavering in his stomach, trying his best to ignore his sister's and mother's looks of smitten delight.

"J-Jane," he stammered. "T-this is my Christmas gift to you." He held out the brightly patterned box with a lopsided smile. "I-I love you."

The brunette girl's heart soared as she grasped the box with trembling hands. "Thank you Mike. I... I love *you* more," she cooed. In the background she could see Mrs. Wheeler readying her Polaroid camera for a photograph, and instinctively braced herself. There was a bright flash of light, and the camera made its distinctive *click-whirr* sound.

El placed her box gingerly down onto the couch, and moved to grab Mike's gift from under the tree. Bright spots danced before her eyes as she turned to her boyfriend and offered it to him with a bashful look. "Mike? For... for you. Merry Christmas," she declared simply. He gazed at her longingly as he took it, and there was no mistaking the spark of appreciation and desire that lay there.

"One more, okay?" Karen gushed happily as she raised the camera back up to her eye. "You two look so beautiful together!" *Click! Flash! Whirr!*

Nancy clapped excitedly for the two teens and squealed, "C'mon, let's

see what you both got!"

Mike flopped himself down onto the couch next to Eleven, and tore into his present with hungry anticipation. He stared open-mouthed as its contents were revealed. "Whooooa!" he uttered in amazement. "A Return of the Jedi Imperial Shuttle to go with my Millennium Falcon model! And what's... what's *this*?"

He held up a small, but exquisitely framed photograph for the others to see. It was a reprint of the goofy picture that Jonathan had taken of him and El that memorable night at the Snow Ball.

"To remember our first dance. Our first *kiss*," El whispered simply. She remembered her mood lifting slightly the day Hopper and Joyce had come back from Starcourt Mall, to show her the finished result before they'd helped her wrap it together with his other present. The original was still pinned above her dresser back at the cabin, next to Mike's handwritten notes.

Nancy gasped in realization. "So *this* is why Jonathan insisted on making a super secret trip to the darkroom last week!" she exclaimed. Eleven nodded humbly in response, and Nancy hugged the younger girl energetically. "Oh, that's *such* a sweet gift, Jane!"

Mike placed his gifts carefully aside, and turned to his girlfriend, taking her hands in his again. "Thank you *sooo* much," he murmured sincerely.

"You're welcome," El breathed. She gave his hands a gentle squeeze as she turned away to pick up the present he'd given her. *So many presents*. Her fingers trembled again as she balanced it on her knees and unwrapped it carefully. She gulped delightfully when the words on the top of the box became visible. "Converse All-Stars!"

"Oh, this is *sooo exciting*!" Karen babbled. She readied her camera for another shot of the happy couple.

Eleven opened the box, and there they were. A sparkling new pair of white Chuck Taylor hi-tops.

"Your very own," Mike said, blinking rapidly as his mother took yet

another confounded photo. "To replace the ones you've been wearing ever since las... ever since we met." He looked down at the well-traveled Chucks on El's feet. *If shoes could tell a story*, he thought.

Eleven threw her arms around her boyfriend, and touched her forehead to his in loving gratitude. "I-I... Mike. T-thank you," she stammered, her eyes darting downwards shyly. "For *everything*."

Mike squirmed. His mother and Nancy were both giving him that look again. "You're welcome," he whispered back, hands resting gently on her hips. "Thank *you* for coming into my life."

"It's a shame Ted isn't awake," Karen quipped she laid her small collection of Polaroids out on the table. "Never mind, I'll show these to him later. I'm sure he will love it." She shook her head in finality and stood back up. "This was certainly delightful, but I'd better check on Holly and then get back to cleaning up. Make yourself at home, Jane. I suppose you'll both want to stay up for a while longer yet. If I don't see you before morning, then have a good night!"

With that, Mrs. Wheeler was gone once more.

Nancy looked pointedly at the couple, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "I'm going to help Mom, then call Jonathan. See you tomorrow morning. El, you and Mike have *fun*, alright?" Mike could almost swear his big sister's expression read *I know what you'll be getting up to later*.

"We will," Eleven responded with a faintly amused look of her own as Nancy departed after her mother. She grabbed Mike's hand assertively. "*Basement?*"

No sooner had the basement door closed behind them than El flung her arms around Mike and pulled him close for another explosive make-out session. They stood at the top of the stairs kissing and touching ravenously for a long while, allowing their bottled-up longing for each other and the stress of nine agonizing days apart to drain away before Mike gently broke the kiss. He led his girlfriend down to their blanket fort where they collapsed thankfully onto the giant pile of sleeping bags and cushions, glad to be alone together

after so many hours in the company of others.

Mike's Supercom was still propped up against the wall next to the night light, where he'd left it earlier. El grabbed it and turned it over in her hands.

"Don't press Transmit! Hopper might pick up," Mike teased her.

She wrinkled her nose at him and giggled. "No, *silly*. He's at Aunt Joyce's, remember?" She put the walkie talkie away and stretched herself out languidly, rubbing up against him like a cat. "Should have made the fort bigger," she added in the same joking tone.

"It was the best I could do at the time," Mike replied, smiling sadly to himself as the memories of that first dark and stormy night flooded back. "It's much nicer when it's small and cozy though. Means we can do *this*." He snuggled himself closer to El.

Eleven remembered that night, too. Things had been a lot different back then. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his steady breathing and the rhythm of his heartbeat. She curled a lazy leg over his.

"Mike?" she asked quietly. "Dustin. Lucas. Max. Do you think... they'll accept *me* as your girlfriend?" She knew that she already had Will's blessing, as he'd solemnly confided to her at brunch, but ten days ago Hopper had promptly whisked her away after the Snow Ball, and she hadn't seen any of her other friends since. That night at the school dance she'd monopolized virtually all of Mike's time, and she hoped that the others weren't mad at her for that.

Mike stroked her curls gently. "Of course! We can announce it to them together." He traced a finger lightly down her neck and chuckled. "I have a feeling they already know. And from the sounds of things, we're not going to be the only... *lovebirds*... in our party."

El's eyes widened. She lifted her head up off his chest and stared wondrously at him. "Oh! Max and Lucas?"

"Yeah! Dustin told me he saw them getting pretty frisky together at the Snow Ball." Mike grinned wickedly and couldn't resist teasing his

girlfriend a little bit more. "See? I **told** you she had the hots for Lucas and not me. *You* are the-

"only one I love," El finished for him, remembering their heartfelt conversation from back at the cabin. She scooted herself up so their faces were almost touching, and gazed into her boyfriend's dark eyes once more. "Mike? I... I'm so happy to be with you again. Hopper *promised* he would make it happen," she whispered. "And it came *true*."

Mike blinked. "Yeah, I guess Hop's not such an asshole after all. He only made us wait **nine** days this time, not **353**."

El giggled. "Don't talk about my dad like that," she chided him with a gentle poke to the ribs.

"Good point. I might have to ask him to let me marry you one day," Mike groaned. He reached out a hand and stroked El's cheek in a delicate gesture. "Hopper came to see me, to give me your note. It's on the wall in my bedroom now." His eyes darted away briefly, then focused on El again. "He... he promised me pretty much the same thing, El. And that he's *not* going to stop us being together."

El thought about her new rules and nodded. "Yes. Rule number four," she whispered. "Dad gave me four new rules. To help me be safe in the world." Her expression deepened, trying to connect the dots between Hopper's quietly insistent words and the time she'd spent with Mike the day after the Snow Ball. Her fingers slid up under his polo shirt, savoring the warmth of his skin against hers. "Dad... Aunt Joyce... they *won't* stop us exploring our love. But they said people in love sometimes do *stupid* things."

"Oh, El," Mike sighed. He rolled onto his back and studied the underside of the old table that served as the roof of the fort. "Hop and Mrs. Byers told you we should talk things over, right?" The chief hadn't given him any explicit instructions the day he'd dropped by with El's note, but Mike had enough intuition to put two and two together, and now he started to feel the trickle of self-doubt creeping into his mind.

He felt El tense beside him. "Yes," she answered softly.

"For me, things are no different to what they were nine days ago. No different to what they were a *year* ago." Mike rolled back onto his side to face El again, and took her hands in his. "I'm *still* madly in love with you, Eleven, and I... I know we still need to figure ourselves out together. But I can't help but think of what Hopper said to us that day back at the cabin." The self-doubt was really gnawing at him now.

"After our fight with him?"

"Y-yeah. Hopper said that he hoped to wait a couple more years before discussing our relationship. Or maybe even *never*." Mike sniffed quietly as he felt his eyes moistening, and the words kept tumbling out of his mouth in a mad emotional rush. "And... and now it's got me thinking, what if you'd been given those precious few years out in the world? To adjust to *normal* life, and to meet new people. Others our age. Would you still have fallen in love with me? Or would you have found someone else to love?"

He took a ragged breath, unable to stop his tears from flowing.

"People in love sometimes do stupid things. Was I being *stupid*? Was it too soon to ask you to go out with me, El?" he finally whimpered.

El's wide brown eyes started welling with tears also. "Mike. *Please*. The night you found me on Mirkwood. After you took me home and cared for me. Built me *this*." She indicated the collection of furniture, sheets and pillows enclosing them. "That first week we spent together. It was *enough* for... for me. To know I *never* want to be with anyone else." Her hands found his face again, caressed the freckles she'd grown to love, wiped the tears away from his eyes. "One week. One year. Two years. *It doesn't matter*." She echoed his own words back to him, in a desperate attempt to make him realize she was being sincere. "**You** are the only one I love."

Mike sobbed in relief as El's words drove themselves home in his mind, and the two teens melted together in a tearful embrace.

"The day after the Snow Ball," El murmured into the crook of Mike's neck after a while, when she felt like she could speak properly again. "When we did sex. Remember what I said?"

Mike stroked El's hair tenderly. "Sex is when two people love each other. *We* love each other," he whispered back. "I remember."

El propped herself up on an elbow and stared optimistically at him then, the glow of the night light illuminating her beautiful face.

"Do you understand now?"

Note - I don't own Stranger Things. Or Star Wars. Or Converse All-Stars. Seriously, it was an absolute blast trying to think of what the couple could have ended up giving each other that Christmas. Fairly sure I'm not the only fan who went down the Chuck Taylor route :)

I also can't take all of the credit for Mike and El's angst-ridden discussion in the fort. Some months back I came across *Calm Hours* by LiaGwriter (specifically the chapter *I fell in love with you, not them*) which finally helped me sort out the minor plot thread related to Hopper's 'Actually hoped never' comment in chapter 3 of my own story that I'd been struggling with. So thanks to her for that.

Next chapter features the first appearance of Dad Steve!

13. Insert Coin

A new day (well, night) in the timeline means more world-building, new locations, and more fluff!

And yessss, finally a chance to write something involving Dad Steve.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 28, 1984

Insert Coin

So tell it on the streets

Tell it on the radio

We're endless like the sea

A never ending flow

In the deepest blue

- ***The Deepest Blue***, Kristine

Hopper shut off the water with a satisfied grunt and reached for a towel, shivering as a rush of cool air hit his skin. He stepped out of the tub and dried himself off vigorously, trying to work a bit of heat back into his body after the relative warmth of the shower.

His drab brown police uniform was hanging on a hook by the sink, and it only took him a matter of minutes to douse himself with a liberal amount of cologne and pull on his clothing. He spent a few moments more looking in the mirror, smoothing down his matted hair and making sure the bags under his eyes weren't getting any heavier. He made a grab for his watch and glanced at the time as he strapped it to his wrist and finally buttoned up his cuffs. **18:52**. Less than forty minutes before night shift started.

Fully dressed, he strode back into the living area of his cabin. Off in the corner the fire crackled merrily, but he could see it was down to its last couple of logs, and decided he may as well grab a few more to keep it going into the night. It was only then that he noticed Eleven's dinner still sitting on the dining room table, untouched and very

cold.

"*Christ*," Hopper muttered to himself, eyes darting from the table over to El's bedroom. As he'd expected, the door was tightly shut.

"...so how'd your very first study session with Max go today? Still feel like breaking her arm? Over."

Eleven giggled and pressed the Transmit button on her Supercom. "No, silly! It was nice. I learnt new things, over."

"Yeah, there's gonna be a lot more for you to learn in the future," Mike's voice crackled softly through the speaker. He sounded thoughtful. "I-I'm glad you and Max are getting along though. Lucas told me she seems a lot happier now she's got you to talk to. He said Max told him *boys don't get it* sometimes? Over."

El stared up at the pockmarked ceiling of the cabin and nodded, though she knew Mike couldn't see her doing it. "Yes," she answered simply. "So... Mike? What are you doing? Over."

"Right now? I'm lying on my bed, talking to *you* about nothing and everything," he replied. "Over."

El closed her eyes and shivered dreamily. "Me too, Mike. It's like you're right here. Next to me. Over." She yawned hugely, stretching tired muscles as she shifted around on her bed. They'd been talking for almost half an hour, ever since Hopper had disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for work.

"Kind of. It's nowhere near as tubular as being there in real life," Mike's voice came back in a slightly mournful tone. "I-I miss being able to hold you and kiss you and touch you. Over."

There was a slight pause. "Could come find you in the Void? Over," El finally suggested.

"Noooo! Belay that. *Please*, El, we've been over this," Mike protested. He attempted to change the subject before either of them could get upset about it. "Anyway, you asked what I'm doing? Well, Dustin and Will suggested going to the arcade tonight, because it's Friday! Lucas

and Max will be there too. But I... I told them I don't really feel like going. Since you can't come with us. Over." His voice definitely sounded mournful now.

Eleven frowned and unconsciously gripped her Supercom a bit harder. "*Who* says I can't? Over," she stated flatly.

"N-no one! I... I just didn't know whether you'd be allowed to come to the arcade or not. I-I mean..." She could hear Mike drawing a shaky breath over the fuzzy static of the radio transmission. "It's still not *safe*, is it? Over."

El sighed. She hit Transmit again. "Dad said... I *can* go out in the world now. With friends," she said in a firm voice. "With *you*. Rule number three, remember? Over."

"It... I... uhhh," Mike stumbled at first, surprised despite himself at El's bluntness. "I didn't think Hopper meant like, *right away*, over?"

"Why not? He said *whenever*." A naughty thought slipped into her mind and she whispered, "Maybe he doesn't need to know? Over."

There was a moment or two of silence while Mike digested El's words. "What, you mean... like *sneak out* of the cabin?" He took a deep breath and continued, "Look, the others said they're all meeting there at eight-zero-zero, but I'd rather lie here in bed and talk with you all night, El. Over."

El giggled despite herself. "Copy that. But I want to hold *you*. Kiss *you*. Touch *you*. *For real*. Can't do that if we lie here talking all night," she teased. "Please, Mike? I want to come to the arca-"

She jumped and broke off at a sharp rap on her bedroom door. "Eleven? Damn it, what did I tell you about eating dinner first, *then* calling Wheeler?" Hopper's voice called. He didn't sound all that pleased.

"Sorry! Five minutes," she called back to him.

"*Now*, kiddo! Your dinner's gone cold! You'll have plenty of time for chit chat once I've left for work," came Hopper's grumpy reply. She heard him walk away from the door.

"Shit, was that Hopper just then?" Mike said. "Over."

"Yes," El replied into her walkie talkie, easing herself out of bed. "I kind of forgot to eat dinner. He has to go on night shift soon. Over."

"Wait. Did you just say *night shift*? Over."

"From seven-three-zero to seven-three-zero," El explained, crossing over to the door. "Mike? I-I should go now. But... I *still* want to come to the arcade. *Please*? Over."

"Copy that," Mike said, a note of excited mischief creeping into his voice. "Tell you what. Call me back once Hopper leaves for work. I have a cunning plan. Love you. Over and out."

Steve Harrington clutched the steering wheel of his dad's BMW in silent frustration, and wondered for what seemed like the hundredth time that night why he'd even allowed Dustin to talk him into doing this.

"Noooo! Will said Randolph, I'm sure of it!" Mike was yelling at Dustin from the back seat. "Or was it Denfield?"

Dustin swung around in his seat to face Mike. "Shut up he did not. He said *Prospect!*"

"Randolph meets Prospect, *dumbass*. And was it a willow tree, or an oak tree? God damn it," Mike ground out. "The range on your regular Supercoms is *useless!*"

"Get outta here Mike. I'm not the one who scored a High Power 'cause my crazy girlfriend's not even *allowed to leave the house!*"

"Dustin you assho-"

"Hey, hey, **HEY!** Guys! Guys, just calm down alright!" Steve was getting really agitated now. He grabbed Dustin by the shoulder to stop him from doing anything stupid, and tried his hardest to keep the car on the road at the same time. "Dustin, you're the one with the fancy headset. Can you just try calling Will again and get him to repeat his directions? Look, how about I swing onto 9th so you get

better reception?" He indicated an intersection up ahead in the distance.

"Be easier just to drive straight to Will's and knock on the door at this rate," Mike complained.

"Oh my god are you *nuts*? If Mrs. Byers finds out she'll tell Hopper and all hell will break loose," Dustin exclaimed breathlessly. "Then we'll all be grounded. During Christmas break too!"

"Hey *calm down*, you little shits!" Steve was on the verge of stopping the car and making them walk the rest of the way. "Wheeler's right. Why don't I just drive down Will's road, and you can call him from right outside?"

"Will's house is on the edge of town, Steve," Mike bit out. "What if Hopper's cabin's on the other side of town from Will's? We're wasting enough time as it is, and Will is gonna be leaving for the arcade soon."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "We're in a *car*, Mike. If you haven't noticed. It's *way* faster than pedaling a bike." He swiveled around in his seat to face Mike again, and there was no mistaking the shit-eating grin on his face. "Man you're awfully worked up tonight. You must be totally dying to see El." He turned back to look out the windscreen and continued innocently, "Anyway, I thought you'd have been over to Hopper's plenty of times to suck face with her by now."

"Guys? *Please*, can you just... knock it off!" Steve interrupted before Mike could retort. "Otherwise you're both getting out and walking. *Or* I drop you off at the police station to face Hopper. Your choice."

"Ugghhhh, *fine*. I'm sorry Steve. And Dustin," Mike huffed. He sat back and folded his arms.

"Fine, I'm sorry too. But *you* start-OOF!" Dustin's comeback was cut short by a firm punch in the arm from Steve.

"Are you done?" he finally asked the duo.

The boys nodded contritely.

"Good. Now I'm just going to keep driving towards Will's house, alright? Dustin, make yourself useful and keep trying to contact him before he leaves." Steve glanced in the rear-view mirror at Mike. "So you've never been to Hopper's cabin, huh?"

"I've only been there once with Jonathan," Mike answered sullenly. He fidgeted in the seat. "And I wasn't paying attention to where we were going. It's out of the way for a reason, we all know that."

"*Riiiiight*," Steve said pointedly. "I get it. You think maybe after you figure out where it is tonight, you'll be able to sneak over there whenever you want. You're a man after my own heart, Wheeler."

Mike's face turned beet red. "Just like how you used to sneak into Nancy's room all the time?" he spat.

Steve chuckled calmly at Mike's obvious discomfort. "Yup. *Exactly*."

"Guys! Shut up. I managed to get hold of Will again." Dustin put a hand to his headset and nodded. "Go ahead buddy, over?"

Mike turned the volume up on his Supercom just in time to catch most of Will's staticky transmission. "...take Denfield until you see an old oak tree, and turn right onto the trail. Once that dead ends it's five minutes' walk. Why is it so important right now? We're supposed to be going to the arcade. Over."

"Uhhh, you'll see," Dustin said hurriedly. "Anyway, see you at the arcade, thanks, bye, over and out." He turned and peered at Steve. "So, Denfield. You know where that is?"

Steve was already busy swinging the BMW around. "On it. You two brats *better not* be wasting my time. What the hell does an oak tree even look like, anyway?"

Mike made damn sure Hopper's Blazer was nowhere in sight before bounding quickly over the tripwires and up the rickety steps of the old cabin. He knocked sharply on the weathered old door the way he'd been taught: *tap-tap, tap, tap-tap-tap*, barely able to conceal his impatience.

It felt like an eternity before he heard the sound of the locks sliding back. Then the door opened, and there she was.

His heart began to beat faster as El pulled him inside the cabin and slammed the door again behind them. "El? We... we shouldn't leave Steve and Dustin waiting too lo-" he managed to gasp before her mouth was all over his. It lasted for a good long while.

El broke the kiss at last, nibbling gently at Mike's lower lip as she pulled away, and moved to grab her heavy winter coat. "Steve is here?" she asked, shrugging it on and looking around the room for her deerskin hat.

"Yeah! He borrowed his dad's car so we could come get you." Mike's mouth and loins still tingled from her passionate kiss, and for a moment he thought about going back outside to tell the guys to carry on without him, so he could stay with El in the cabin instead. But then he noticed her hopeful, shining eyes, and decided that one sneaky night out at the arcade would be a far more valuable experience for her. He placed his hands tenderly on El's hips and gazed at her dreamily. "Are you still sure you wanna do this?"

"Hop... Dad won't know," she said. "It's only for a few hours. Bored of the cabin anyway. I *hate* being alone here at night."

"Does Hop always leave you on your own when he works the night shift?" The instant the words slipped out Mike regretted how silly they sounded. *Of course he does. He wouldn't have had any choice.*

Eleven didn't mind, though. "Yes," she whispered. "It's *horrible* sometimes... I can't sleep. Because of the *nightmares*." She pressed her body tightly against his. "So I think of you. It helps."

Mike felt a deep pang of anguish for what she'd had to go through during the year they'd been apart. He drew her even closer and murmured, "Tell you what. I'll ask Hopper if I can come stay when he goes on night shift." He stroked her hair lovingly. "Or maybe we can get him to take you to the Byerses. He might like that idea better? At least you wouldn't be alone at night anymore."

El looked at her boyfriend in silent amazement, overwhelmed by the

amount of loving care he was constantly showing her, and nodded.

"Then that's settled," Mike said firmly. "Things *need* to start changing, El." He gave her one of his adorable goofy smiles, then spun her lightly around and guided her over to the front door. "C'mon. We've been gone so long Steve and Dustin probably think we're still making out. Let's hit the arcade!"

Steve pulled his car into the parking lot of the Palace, drawing to a halt next to the three figures standing impatiently under the veranda, clearly freezing their asses off in the winter's chill. He wound down his window and eyeballed them cheerfully. "Evening, shitbags. Hope you haven't been waiting long?"

Will managed to stammer a hello through chattering teeth, despite all the layers he was wearing. He looked almost like he was back in the Upside Down again.

"What even is this, Harrington? We told you *eight o'clock!*" Lucas complained.

"Yeah, well, that was before I got sidetracked by these two dweebs." He jerked a thumb backwards as the rear door opened and Eleven stepped out, followed closely by Mike.

Max's eyes widened and she squealed in excitement. "*Oh my god!* Eleven! You... you came!" She rushed over to give the brunette girl a warm hug as Lucas and Will crowded around them excitedly.

"So much for not joining us, Mike. You sly dog," Lucas teased with a grin.

"N-now I know... wh-what that call earlier was all a-about," chattered Will.

"You could have waited inside for us, you know," Dustin wheedled as he walked towards the group. He exchanged an enthusiastic series of fist bumps with all of his friends, then turned to Steve. "Thanks for helping us out tonight. I owe you one."

Steve smirked back at him, and shrugged. "Yeah, I'd say so. But I

guess Wheeler now owes you bigtime as well." He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "So... back here at ten o'clock, right?"

Dustin nodded. "Ten o'clock, right. Unless you wanna stay and help keep an eye on Eleven?" He looked round just in time to see the others disappear through the entrance. "HEY! Wait up, assholes!"

The bell above the door jingled cheerily as it opened. Eleven took three steps into the arcade and stopped dead in her tracks, eyes widening as she took in the wondrous sight that lay before her. *So many colors. So many sounds. So many people.* For a brief moment the blaring noises and the flashing lights all threatened to overwhelm her telekinetically enhanced senses altogether, but Mike came up behind her then, and gently wrapped his arm around her waist to steady her.

"Everything alright?" he murmured into her ear.

She turned to him, eyes shining in a mixture of fascination and apprehension. "This is so... so *bitchin'*," she whispered back.

"I know, right? Stay close." His hand grasped hers tenderly as they followed the others up to the counter.

"Hey, it's the wastoids! And I see you've brought a new wastoid along with you tonight." The pasty-faced arcade attendant grabbed another handful of Cheetos and ogled the group pointedly as they approached. "Who do we have the pleasure of meeting?" he exclaimed, mouth full of junk food.

"Knock it off, Keith," Dustin retorted, making his way to the front of the group. "This is Jane. Jane Hopper, *Chief Hopper's* daughter. So you better watch yourself. Now exchange some quarters for us, pronto." He slapped a crisp twenty onto the counter as the others dug various bills out of their pockets.

Keith's eyes widened. "Oh, so the rumors I've been hearing are true after all," he said as he opened the register and readied a pile of coins for the gang. "Welcome to Hawkins, m'lady. Though if I'm honest, you could have picked a better group of people to hang out with rather than *this* lot," he added with a devious look at Mike.

"Blow it out your ass," Dustin countered as he picked up his collection of coins. He turned back to the others and gestured towards Dragon's Lair. "Shall we?" He walked off before anyone else could reply.

"Nuh-uh. Dragon's Lair *sucks*," Max sniffed. "I'm going to play Dig Dug. Stalker, you coming?"

"Forget Dig Dug, Madmax. There's a crowd," Lucas objected. "The Galaga machine's free though." He grabbed a bunch of quarters and made a beeline straight for it. Max trailed after him, shouting something over the din that the others didn't quite catch.

Will rolled his eyes at the other departing couple, and turned to Mike and El. "Soooo... when are you two, y'know, gonna announce..." he asked, looking down knowingly at their hands still tightly clasped together.

Mike blushed and shuffled nervously. "Tonight seems like the best opportunity. But I didn't realize it would be so busy in here," he replied. El gave a tiny nod in agreement.

Will grinned at them. "We've got a couple hours, there's plenty of time. For what it's worth, Mike? Me and El talked about it on Christmas. I'm *sooo* thrilled for you both. It's really nice to see El happy again after all the shit that's gone down."

"Thanks, Will," Mike replied sincerely. "Hope things are going better for you too."

"They are." Will's expression grew serious. "Have to go see the doc for a regular check-up every Wednesday at 10, but I'm feeling a *lot* better than I was at Halloween. Anyway, I'll be back! I just noticed no one's playing Buck Rogers!" He ran off towards the pinball section.

Mike turned to El. "Wanna play Pac-Man? C'mon, I'll teach you." They walked hand-in-hand over to the distinctive bright yellow cabinet, right next to Max and Lucas who were fully engrossed in their game of Galaga.

El stared mesmerized at all the moving shapes and colors on the screen while Mike dug a quarter out of his jacket pocket and inserted

it into the flashing coin slot.

"Put your hand on the joystick like *this*," he murmured into her ear quietly, placing his hand over hers and guiding it over to the red paddle. "Don't worry, I'll help you 'til you get the hang of it." He slipped his free arm around her gently and nodded at the screen. "That yellow pizza-shaped thing is Pac-Man. You control him with the joystick... up, down, left, right... moving him around the maze, eating all the little yellow dots." He pointed to Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde. "Those... are the *bad men*. They chase after you around the maze, so *don't* let them touch you! Otherwise Pac-Man dies. You only get three Pac-Men to begin with. When all the Pac-Men are gone, the game ends."

El nodded, fascinated by her boyfriend's charmingly precise explanation of the rules. She pointed to the flashing power pellet. "What is this?"

"Ahh! When you eat one of those, the bad men turn into blue ghosts, and then it's *your* turn to chase them down and eat them!" Mike exclaimed. "But when they start flashing white it means they're going to turn back into *monsters*. So make sure you move Pac-Man away when that happens."

"Monsters?" El whispered, eyes widening. She looked a little bit frightened.

Mike's arm tightened around her waist protectively. "Not *real* monsters, El! They're just pictures on a TV screen." He gestured at the screen once more. "Every time you eat all of the dots, the next stage begins, and the bad men move faster and faster. There's a fruit too, which appears down here. You get more points if you eat it." He beamed at her tenderly and grinned. "Ready to give it a shot?" His hand hovered over the Player One Start button.

El swallowed and shook her curls. "Ready," she murmured in quiet determination. Mike hit Start and the familiar intro jingle began to play.

"Wooo! Go El!" Max enthusiastically proclaimed from stage left. She'd finished her round of Galaga with Lucas, and the two of them were

now attentively watching her and Mike.

Eleven allowed Mike to guide her for the first dozen turns, watching intently as Pac-Man moved around the on-screen maze in time with their precise movements. "Look out!" she giggled as they drew breathlessly close to Blinky, the red monster. Mike spotted a nearby power pellet, deftly flicked the joystick to the right, and suddenly Blinky had turned into a blue shadow of his former self. El let out a small cheer as Pac-Man gulped him down for 200 points.

"You getting the hang of it now?" Mike asked. He slowly withdrew his hand from hers, but kept snuggling her tightly against him. "Go get 'em!"

She focused her mind. *It's all on.* El janked the controls one way, then the other way. Left, right, up, and down, moving the little yellow avatar around the maze as though her life totally depended on it. It was only a matter of moments before she'd cleared the cherry stage, and then it was straight into strawberry. She cleared that one too with poised grace, and laughed in surprise as the cute little intermission played. The moments continued to tick by, and El felt more and more confident as she cleared her way through stage after stage.

Then El let out a loud gasp as Clyde and Pinky managed to sandwich her Pac-Man in a particularly nasty section of the maze. Mike rubbed her leg fondly as she turned to him with a crestfallen look in her eyes. "It's alright El," he murmured. "You've got more lives, remember? You made it through five stages without dying once!"

"Not bad for a newbie," a voice declared from off to the side. Mike turned to see Harrington standing behind them, a milkshake in one hand.

"I thought you were coming back at ten to pick us up?" he asked the older teen.

Steve took a sip of his drink and shrugged. "Figured it was easier just to stick around," he replied casually. "Besides, Hopper would kill *you* first, then *me* if Eleven got into any trouble while sneaking out like this. So here I still am."

Without any warning Keith appeared next to Harrington. "Hey uh, dude, you might wanna finish that drink outside. I ain't cleaning your mess up if you spill it." He glanced at the screen and did a double take. "Whoa, is she still on her first credit? That's *impressive*, man. Must have played this a lot back where she came from, huh?" He looked back around only to discover Steve had slipped away. "What the...?"

Mike chortled at the attendant's sudden consternation, and focused his attention back on El as she continued her game. The look of determination on her face was compelling to see. Even Max and Lucas had fallen uncharacteristically silent as they stood next to them and watched.

Will finally bounced up to the others, with Dustin following close behind. "Cool! El's playing Pac-Man!" he exclaimed.

"And doing pretty damn well too," Dustin added. He looked peevishly at Will. "Better than *us* at Dragon Lair, anyway. I swear that piece of shit machine's been programmed to eat all my quarters."

"El's already up to the first Galaxian stage!" Max replied, shaking herself out of her trance.

"Reckon she's better at Pac-Man than *you*, Madmax?" Lucas asked her with a sly grin.

"Shut it, Stalker."

El wrestled with the joystick, studiously trying to ignore the bustle and hubbub going on around her. These higher stages were definitely starting to wear her down, and she heard her friends all groan in sympathetic pain when she lost a couple more lives in quick succession. Now she was down to her last Pac-Man, with over half the stage still left to go. Gritting her teeth, she focused her mind and weaved through the maze as quickly as the computer would let her, aiming the little pizza-shaped thing towards the final remaining power pellet in the top left corner.

The instant he'd gobbled it up she changed direction smoothly and edged towards the closest blue ghost.

The ghost began flashing white...

They change back so fast, she thought to herself. But she kept gunning for him anyway.

Kept flashing...

Too late! Her final Pac-Man slammed straight into poor old Blinky.

GAME OVER.

El took a deep breath, and finally turned away from the arcade machine. "That was... totally... *bitchin'*," she declared to her friends as they bantered excitedly, trading high-fives and congratulating her on the epic game she'd just completed.

Her eyes met Mike's for a brief second, and they nodded at each other fractionally. *Now or never.*

Mike waited until the commotion had died down, then turned to the others, deliberately taking hold of El's hand. She squeezed it gently. "So since the party's all here, El and me have an... announcement to make." He inclined his head in her direction.

"Yes. Mike is my *boyfriend*." She blushed fiercely and gave Mike a longing look.

Mike returned her gaze with a goofy smile. "Yeah. And so, like, that means El is my *girlfriend*."

They both stood there nervous and red-faced, waiting for the news to sink in.

It didn't take long. "*Finally!*" Max thundered. "Ever since the Snow Ball we've been wondering when you two were going to make it *official*." She looked completely starstruck. Next to her, Lucas and Dustin were both grinning harder than El had ever seen before, and Will was bouncing in elation. Even Steve looked suitably impressed.

Mike beamed at all of his friends, and at all of their jubilant faces. He hugged El even tighter and chuckled. "As it turns out, my girlfriend's pretty damn good at Pac-Man, too."

Pac-Man was and still is my favorite arcade game. So simple to learn yet incredibly hard to master, it felt like the perfect first game for Mike to teach El. I reckon she'd be pretty badass at it.

We will definitely return to this plot thread.

None of the maps of Hawkins floating around the internet seem to line up with each other. In the end I picked one I found on a blog called 'The Busybody' to use as a reference for Mike's car journey.

14. Night Shift

More Hopper-Mike verbal sparring, and a chance for Joyce to shine.

#JusticeForBenny.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

December 28, 1984

Night Shift

*I can tell by the look in your eyes
You've been hurting
You know I'll never let you down, oh no
And I'll try anything to keep it working
You gave me time to find out
What my heart was looking for
- **Heaven In Your Eyes**, Loverboy*

"So how much did you spend on Dragon's Lair in the end, Dustin?"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up!* I still say that machine is rigged."

"All of it, I think."

"Is that why you asked Harrington to buy your supper?"

"*Shut up*, Sinclair! I said I'd pay him back!"

"You damn well better, Henderson."

The teenagers had left the Palace Arcade behind, and were now about to tuck into a celebratory late night snack at Benny's Burgers before going their separate ways. The party continued to chatter excitedly about the evening's events as they waited for their food to arrive, under the watchful eyes of both Steve Harrington and Will's mother Joyce.

Joyce smiled over the rim of her mug at Eleven. The young brunette

was sitting across from her at the table, clutching gently at Mike, a look of perpetual unease in her doe-like eyes as she stared between all of her friends and listened to the banter flying around the booth.

"Yeah! Here comes our food, I think!" crowed Will as he caught sight of the waitress striding towards them, a full tray in her hands.

"About time. All that frantic button mashing's helped me work up an appetite," Max laughed.

Joyce took another sip of her coffee, and pondered the situation carefully. A quarter of an hour earlier she'd driven into the parking lot of the Palace to collect Will, and had been mildly taken aback the instant she'd caught sight of El and Mike hand-in-hand as they waited under the veranda with the others, but knew it wasn't worth making a big deal about. She guessed the couple had their reasons for venturing out together without Hopper's knowledge, and figured she would coax the details out of them sooner rather than later.

"What's wrong with you, Dustin? I thought you liked burgers," quipped Lucas as their meals were set down in front of them. He was eyeing Dustin's fried chicken with a skeptical look on his face.

"Course I do, but they've never quite been the same here since Benny died," Dustin remarked a little too loudly, tucking into his food with gusto. "The new owners sure do make a good chicken waffle though!"

Mike threw a sorrowful look at his girlfriend, feeling her tense up at the mention of Benny's name. He pulled her closer to him, shooting Dustin a warning glance in the process. His friend quickly got the hint and averted his eyes sheepishly.

It had taken El a long time to finally open up to Mike about her movements in the hours before they'd met on Mirkwood that stormy November night back in 1983, and she still felt the residual guilt over Benny's death at the hands of Brenner's goons. She remembered lying in Mike's arms and sobbing unconsolably as he'd assured her over and over again it *wasn't* her fault, but Benny had been the very first person out in the world to treat her with any dignity and care. *Even before Mike*. His death still weighed heavily on her as a result.

She squeezed her eyes shut and wished they hadn't come here in the first place. But as Mike had once explained to her about the party, *it's a democracy and the majority vote always wins*.

"Everything okay, El?" Mike was saying to her in a low, urgent voice. "Do you want to leave? I-I'm not all that hungry anyway. We could get our food bagged to go?"

Her eyes shimmered as she looked at her boyfriend. "N-no, it's alright," she whispered back. "It's... nice to be... with *friends*." She dejectedly picked at her basket of fries, trying her hardest not to burst into tears at the heartbreaking memory it conjured up.

"I *know* how you feel about this place," Mike murmured. "Benny was a good man, and he didn't deserve what happened to him. *Please*, El? The moment you can't stand it anymore, just tell me and I'll ask Steve if we can bust this joint." He hugged her affectionately.

The furtive conversation between the two teens hadn't gone unnoticed. "El, honey? Mike? Is everything alright?" Joyce asked, setting her mug down on the table.

"Y-yes, thanks Mrs. Byers. Everything is fine," Mike quickly stammered. "It's just that... I think we're going to have to get El home soon. There were so many people at the arcade and El's senses are a bit overwhelmed now."

Joyce smiled sadly. She'd already put two and two together, of course. She reached across the table and caressed El's hand. "Hopper won't be back from work until tomorrow morning, so don't worry about him. I know you're not technically meant to be out tonight, but after that talk we had at Christmas I totally understand." She glanced over at Will busy wolfing down his sandwich and her smile turned brittle. "I... know what happened *here* too. After Will disappeared, Hop was following up on every lead, and... when he got the call to come here... oh, El... let's just say we would *never* have found you if things hadn't happened this way."

Eleven looked at Aunt Joyce. "Benny," she whimpered, her lower lip beginning to tremble.

"Yes," Joyce whispered back. "I'm so sorry."

Suddenly Lucas and Max both lurched to their feet, totally oblivious to the goings-on at the other end of the booth, and simultaneously cleared their throats. El turned her eyes towards them in total surprise, her despair momentarily forgotten, as did the rest of the group.

"So, in light of the *other* announcement that took place earlier tonight," Lucas exclaimed with a flourish at El and Mike, "Max and I would like to say something too."

Joyce stared at El and Mike. "You *didn't!*" she exclaimed with an amused look. "Oh, congratulations!"

"God help us," Mike mumbled jokingly. He hugged El even tighter as he waited for the big announcement.

Max beamed. "Stalker and me, we'd like to say that we're also now officially going out." She grabbed Lucas' hand tenderly and gave him a chaste peck on the lips as the pair sat back down again.

El managed a small smile in spite of her mood. "Yay, Max and Lucas!"

"Oh, like we didn't see *that one* coming either," Will giggled. "But I'm so happy for you guys too."

"Yeah, me too," Dustin affirmed, though he didn't look anywhere near as happy as Will. He nevertheless raised his can of Coke in a toast to the couple, and swigged it heavily.

"Okay. Great. Cool. So who's gonna announce they're going steady next?" Steve wisecracked. He pointed at Dustin, then Will. "*You and you?*"

Will's face went beet red. "HEY! Knock it off, Steve!" Dustin exclaimed. "Just you wait. I'll get there. And Will too!"

And with that, the banter took off around the table once again.

Mike turned back to his girlfriend, filtering the raucous yabbering of their other friends out of his brain. "El? Think it's time to go?"

El nodded at him. "Yes. Tell Steve?" But the look in her eyes still implored *please don't make me spend the rest of the night alone in the cabin.*

Mike's heart caught in his throat, and he stopped and considered their options for a moment. "Actually, I have a better idea," he answered finally and turned to Joyce. "Mrs. Byers? El and me, we've got a favor to ask of you."

Joyce looked up and smiled at her son's best friend. "Absolutely," she responded, her tone friendly but firm. "But first, how about you tell me the *real* reason why El is here, and not safely tucked up in Hopper's cabin?"

"Hop? Hi. It's me," came a gentle voice down the other end of the line.

"Oh! Hey Joyce," Hopper replied, stretching lazily in his chair and feeling the first genuine stirring of pleasure he'd had in the hours since starting his shift. "What's up? You don't usually call me when I'm on graveyard." Barring the usual lineup of drunks and petty thieves being dragged past the station doors, there wasn't much to write home about on that particular Friday night in Hawkins.

Then his brain caught up with his senses, and his mood abruptly changed to one of slight worry. "Hang on. Is everything alright? Is it Will?"

"Will is perfectly fine," she responded. "It's... about Eleven. And Mike."

"Eleven? And *Wheeler*? Oh no. No no no *no*. What have they done now?" he demanded, mouth suddenly dry with fear, his earlier feelings of contentment now gone.

"Hop? It's not something they've *done*," Joyce soothed. "It's something they wanna *do*."

Hopper blinked in surprise. "Oh, really? And *they* had to get *you* to call *me* to discuss it *right now*?" he growled, dropping his feet off the

desk onto the floor with a thud.

"Hopper, c'mon. When you answered the phone you sounded like you were about to fall asleep," Joyce retorted. "I know there's nothing important going on at the precinct right now that requires your undivided attention. So just listen, okay?"

He sighed and massaged his temples. She had him there. "*Fine*. What is it that El and Wheeler want to do so badly, that they couldn't wait to ask me tomorrow when I'm home?"

"Hang on just a sec." There was the sound of muted fumbling from the earpiece. Hopper frowned. *Surely not...* But then he heard Wheeler's familiar inflection come down the line.

"Hey, Chief. Sir. We, uhh, have something important to ask you." The kid sounded apprehensive, as though he was fully expecting to get an earful for his trouble.

Hopper was silent a moment, not entirely sure where this conversation was about to head. He finally allowed a mild amount of annoyance to creep into his voice, deciding to toy with Mike's uneasiness a bit. "Wheeler. What is it that's so important it couldn't wait until morning, huh?"

"We... we know you work the night shift sometimes," Mike stumbled. "El told me. And we're just wondering if... if, y'know, every time from now on, she could stay at the Byerses? Or... maybe..." There was a pause and more rustling from the earpiece. "Maybe I could come over and stay instead?"

Hopper sighed heavily. *So that's what this is all about.* The ink was barely dry on his agreement with his daughter and Wheeler, and already they were planning to shift things into another gear. "Look, I don't think it's a good idea just yet, Wheeler. The-"

"Why? Because... because you think it's *too soon*?" Mike challenged. "That's what you **always** say, Hopper! ***Always!***"

Shit. Hopper bowed his head and bit out a silent curse. That was exactly what he'd planned to say. "I-"

"No, Hop. El and me waited *so long* to be together again. Christmas has been and gone, and the new year's only a few days away. You gave El her new rules. Things *need* to start changing. Why not start with something as simple as this?" The fury was still there in Mike's voice, but he'd also picked up a slight pleading tone, too.

Hop's head was starting to pound. A vision of the massive argument he'd had with El and Wheeler after the Snow Ball flashed into his mind, and he balled up his fist in frustration. His office was relatively isolated from the rest of the station, but it certainly wasn't the time nor the place to hold a repeat of that day's performance, especially not down a very public telephone line. He also couldn't afford to get too animated with the rest of the night shift staff sitting less than a dozen yards away on the other side of a few thin walls.

Which was probably why Wheeler had gotten into Joyce's ear to call him at work in the first place.

He lit a cigarette, wishing he'd also fixed himself a strong coffee to go with the amount of difficult contemplation he was about to undertake. "I don't understand why you're so intent on moving things along so quick, Wheeler," he protested. "I let El stay with you on Christmas. I gave you both fancy Supercoms. I *promised* I wouldn't get in the way of your relationship. El gets to study with that Mayfield girl, and next year she'll start going to school with you. Surely that's good enough for now?"

"We know, sir. And *thank you* for all you've done so far. But El told me you and Mrs. Byers agreed she could come over here anytime. So why not when you go on night shift?"

Hopper took a drag of his cigarette, feeling like he'd been neatly holed into yet another corner. "I-I just imagined I'd have more time to make arrangements, ease into things before..."

"Sorry Hop, but you don't get to use that excuse anymore," Mike countered. "353 days apart was time enough. It's not like El and me are going to be running all over Hawkins telling everyone what happened at the lab. We've discussed it, and keeping El company when you go on night shift is safer than just leaving her alone all night."

Another flash of annoyance crossed Hopper's face. "Oh, have you now. Why the hell do you keep saying *we*, anyway?" he demanded, assuming Mike was referring to Joyce. *Should have known she'd side with the god damn Wheeler kid.* They'd known each other long enough, after all.

He heard Mike exhale noisily down the line. "Maybe it's better if I let someone else talk."

There was more quiet shuffling as the receiver was handed around once again, then a different voice began to speak. One that took Hopper completely and utterly by surprise.

"Dad? Can... can Mike stay over tonight? With me? Or can I stay... with Aunt Joyce? *Please?*"

Hopper jerked the receiver away like it was a Demo-dog about to chew his ear off. "Wha... Buh... El? You... you're supposed to be at *home*. In the cabin!" he spluttered. "What is going on?"

"When you go on night shift, I-I... it's always so hard to sleep. Because of the *nightmares*." Eleven sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "I *hate* being alone at night. And I-I thought... now I have new rules..." She trailed off with a shuddering breath.

Hopper felt a stab of regret as he recalled all of the times he'd had to work nights over the past year, the horrible realization starting to tear at his heart. He stared down at his desk, thinking once again of how selfish he could actually be sometimes.

"Oh, El. All this time I never even realized. I'm *so sorry*," he breathed. "I... I just haven't had a chance to even think about alternate arrangements yet. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I thought you would get *mad*. I wanted to be *good*... so you'd let me go out in the world earlier," she cried.

"Shh, El. Don't cry. It's alright. Hopper? Can you see *why* it's so important now?" Mike's voice cut in.

The chief sighed and viciously stubbed out his cigarette. Yup, things really were starting to shift into another gear. He rubbed his temples

once more, wondering about the new year which lay tantalizingly close ahead. What would 1985 have in store for him? What would it have in store for El, and Wheeler? For their friends, and for all of them?

New challenges, for sure. New evils? Possibly even old ones?

He figured the kids were probably sharing the receiver, so addressed them both. "Hey. Kid. Wheeler. Listen, you're right. Once again, you're god damn right," he confessed. "I'm *sorry* for being so selfish. We'll make something work, I promise. Maybe we'll alternate between both ideas? The cabin might be a bit far for Wheeler to bike to once the weather warms up, though. And some nights there's gonna be school to worry about."

"I don't care," Mike insisted. "Hawkins isn't that big anyway. There are other ways for me to get out there too."

Hop snorted. "Fine, suit yourself. I hope your legs are up to the challenge. Eleven? I don't know how you came to be over at the Byerses tonight, and probably don't wanna know... but I'm *not* mad. Anymore, at least. Yes, you can either stay there, or have Aunt Joyce drive you both back to the cabin if she doesn't mind. It's up to you."

He heard what sounded like a small explosion of excitement from the other end of the line. "Thank you!" squealed both teens in unison. This time Hopper had to jerk the phone away from his ear to stop himself from going deaf.

"You're welcome. Can you put Joyce back on, please?" Hopper stretched in his chair and stuck his feet back up on his desk, running through all of the burning questions in his mind. He felt it was time to let her critique his parenting skills before he went and made a hash of anything else.

And besides, there was nothing going on at the precinct right now that required his undivided attention anyway.

I didn't really want to keep writing Hopper in such a negative way especially after his slow redemption over the course of

Seasons 1 and 2, but it's been discussed time and time again in the fandom that he's still fairly ill-equipped to handle bringing up someone as unique as Eleven, and often needs a steer back in the right direction. Who better for him to talk to about it than Joyce?

We're so close to Season 3 now!

Warning, the next chapter contains some spoilery call-forwards to the trailers.

15. You Let Us In

SPOILER ALERT - If you haven't seen the final Season 3 trailer, you probably don't want to read the first half of this chapter. This one is a bit of a call-forward to some of the teasers that have been dropped over the last 9 months or so.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 1, 1985

You Let Us In

*Wandering barefoot into nowhere
Just another winter's night
And I don't feel gravity anymore
You never lie, never cry
Never talk me out of dreams
And a dream is what remains
- **Sleepwalking**, Avantasia*

You.

Let us in.

All around her the world was a dim red ruin, completely devoid of life.

An abandoned industrial building loomed to her right. To her left, a shiny Camaro. The sky flashed ominously, and stormclouds slowly circled overhead.

Eleven looked upwards in silent fear at what lay beyond the parting of the clouds. To the pulsing, seething, loathing mass of hatred that was somehow impossibly communicating through the fabric of her very soul.

And now...

You are going to have to let us stay.

Doesn't make sense, she heard herself whimper against the malevolent, suffocating pressure and the ominous, insistent buzzing in her mind.

I... closed the Gate.

She bolted upright in her bed with a horrific wail.

"No, no, *noooooo!*" she screamed and thrashed as she felt two arms reach out to grab her firmly.

"Shhh, El. *El!* El, it's just me. *Mike*. It's just *me*. Please, El," her boyfriend cried. "*Please*, I'm here. You're *safe* now." He drew her close as her frantic movements slowed.

"No! I closed it! ***I closed it!***" she howled into his chest, over and over.

"It's okay, it's okay. I'm *here*. Please, El! Listen!" Mike's grip tightened as he eased her back into a lying position against him. "You're safe in the cabin with *me*. With *us*, now. Hopper's here too. It's going to be alright."

"Doesn't make sense!" she sobbed. "Doesn't... *make... sense!*"

"Kid? Please, just listen to Wheeler." Hopper sat himself down on Eleven's bed next to the couple and reached a comforting arm out to his daughter as she lay weeping in Mike's embrace. "You're safe now. It was just another nightmare." He hadn't bothered to knock. El's blood-curdling scream had been enough to damn the consequences and send him rushing straight in.

It was only then that he noticed the red streaming from her nose and ears.

"Oh shit," he breathed in sudden panic. He'd nursed Eleven through numerous episodes over the past year, each seemingly more frightening than the last, but this was the first time he'd ever seen her bleed as a result.

Hopper stumbled back out into the living area of his cabin, making a beeline for the box of tissues he knew El usually kept next to the couch for when she would watch her sappy daytime soaps. He grabbed it and wearily trudged back into her bedroom. "Uhh,

Wheeler? I think El might have made a mess of your sweater," he muttered as he stooped to wipe his daughter's face.

Mike smiled tiredly at Hopper's attempt to lighten the mood. "It's alright," he replied. "Wash day tomorrow."

El trembled at Hopper's gentle touch, and her eyes finally fluttered open. "M-Mike? Dad?" she gulped weakly.

"Hey, kiddo." He threw her a sad, concerned smile and caressed her cheek lovingly. "It's alright. You're safe now. You just had another nightmare."

He felt her tense then, and take a shuddering breath. "*He* talked to me." Her fingers automatically swiped at her nose, at her ear.

She could see both her father and her boyfriend exchange a worried frown. "*Who* talked to you?" Mike blurted in confusion.

El struggled to a seated position, eyes unfocusing in recollection. "*He talked to me,*" she repeated. "He... he told me. ***You let us in. And now you are going to have to let us stay.***"

"*He?*" Hopper demanded. "Who the hell is *he*? Brenner?"

"No," El whimpered in a voice thick with dread. "*Mind Flayer.*"

"But... I don't understand," Mike stammered. "We forced that son of a bitch out of Will. The Gate no longer exists. He's *gone*. Isn't he?"

"I-I know. It doesn't make sense." She sagged back against Mike and closed her eyes in exhaustion. "I... closed the Gate," she finally repeated, her voice thick with fatigue.

"You sure did, kiddo," Hopper murmured. "The Mind Flayer is *gone*. Don't sweat it. This latest nightmare will be a distant memory by morning."

"It's okay, El. Hop's right," Mike sighed and nuzzled her curls lovingly. "It's all over now. The Mind Flayer *can't* hurt us anymore. Try and get some rest."

3:26 AM. Hopper glanced over at the clock on El's dresser, then back at the teens now quietly cuddling next to him. He watched in silent reflection as the fear and tension in the room slowly drained away, and once he was certain things were back under control, he stirred. "Well, Happy New Year, kids. Welcome to 1985." He yawned solidly, squeezed El's shoulder one last time and heaved himself off her bed. "And now, I'm going to celebrate by trying to get a few more hours' sleep. Don't do anything stupid, Wheeler. See you both in the morning."

El moaned something unintelligible. "Night Hop," Mike answered for the two of them.

Hopper flicked off El's bedside lamp, and padded quietly out of her room, closing the door behind him. He collapsed gratefully into his cot by the fire, and drew the covers back over himself with a groan. He tossed and turned at first, trying to will himself back into slumber, but to no avail. El's haunted words continued to repeat themselves over and over in his mind like a stuck record.

He talked to me.

You let us in. You are going to have to let us stay.

Us. What did she mean by us? Who did she mean by us?

From what he'd been able to coax out of her over the past year, the nightmares were always a pastiche of hellish imagery cobbled together from her tragic past. Sometimes it was Brenner chasing after her. The lab. Mama. Other times, the Demogorgon. The Upside Down. Once she'd even woken up screaming Wheeler's name. He hadn't felt the need to ask her about that one. But tonight was the first ever time El had mentioned being implicitly spoken to in one of her dreams.

And by the goddamned *Mind Flayer*, no less. All he could think about was the blood streaming from her nose and ears. The terrifying scream that had sent him running into her room in the first place.

Was that why it seemed so different this time round? Maybe this had been no ordinary nightmare.

Doesn't make sense. I watched her close the Gate.

Hopper opened his eyes and listened to the wind skirling through the trees outside. *Happy New Year*. Was it a vision of things to come? He really hoped not.

He exhaled and tried to focus on a more pleasant memory, hoping it would help him drift off easier. He managed a lopsided smile in the darkness as he recalled his last glimpse of Eleven and Wheeler as he'd shut the door. They looked peaceful, almost angelic as they lay entwined together, once the pain and the heartache from earlier had dissipated.

As much as he and Wheeler loved to lock horns over the smallest things sometimes, tonight he actually felt grateful for the gangly kid's presence.

Only a few hours ago, he'd almost said *no* when Eleven had approached him to ask if her boyfriend could come over to watch the annual Times Square ball drop on TV. But he'd caught the same joyous look in her eyes that reminded him of the night he'd first explained Christmas to her, and realized it would be yet another step into the world of normality.

Besides, he knew Joyce would be counting on him to do the right thing. El's first real Christmas had been an eye-opening milestone, so why not her first real New Years' as well?

So he'd said *yes*, and El had rushed off excitedly to call Mike back on her Supercom, and then the two of them had driven across town in the Blazer to pick him up. They'd even stopped at Big Buy on the way back to the cabin, to stock up on enough snacks and soda to help keep them awake until the big event, though Hopper had been fairly certain the teens would make it on their own steam judging from the amount of energy they were both radiating.

Sure enough, it was nearly midnight, and Eleven and Mike were still fiddling around with the television, talking softly and giggling at each other every so often while Hop attempted to read his book at the dining table, some stuffy parenting tome that Joyce had insisted

on lending to him. He groaned as he felt his eyelids growing heavier with each passing moment.

"How about now?" Mike called to his girlfriend. He'd crawled around the back and was jiggling the end of the antenna cord where it plugged into the TV.

El made a face. "No, still fuzzy," she replied.

"Okay, how about this?" He grabbed the rabbit ears and bent them outwards in a wide arc.

"No!" she squawked. "That's even *worse!*"

"Ughh, fine." He returned the ears to their previous position, or as close as he could manage anyway, and leaned around to catch a glimpse of the screen. "Yeah, that's still pretty fuzzy. Let me try something else." He picked up the antenna and slowly moved it around in the air.

"No... no... better... bad. Better... oh, stop!" El exclaimed. "That's perfect!"

Mike gave her a look of feigned annoyance. "Uhh, El? One *slight* problem." He indicated the antenna in his outstretched arm, then its position relative to the TV, and grinned. "Don't think this is gonna help, unless I stand like this for the next ten minutes and miss out on all the fun."

"Okay!" she declared cheerily, and plopped herself down on the couch. She curled herself up gracefully and gave him one of her dimpled smiles.

Mike let out a chuckle and rolled his eyes at his girlfriend. He loved it when El was in one of her playful moods. It usually led to... other *more* playful things, but he knew right now was not the time nor the place with Hopper sitting barely ten feet away trying his hardest to ignore what was going on.

"Oh, you little tease," he murmured at her.

"What?" She gave him another innocent look.

He pouted at her. "You know *exactly* what."

"Okay. Maybe I won't help you then," El huffed back at him, but Mike could see the impish look in her warm brown eyes. Then she slowly tilted her head, and a bunch of solid objects came flying from the bookshelf in the corner of the cabin. She focused intently on them as they spun lazily around in midair, in front of Mike's surprised but exuberant face.

Oh, of course, he thought to himself.

Hopper looked up blearily from his book at the commotion, and jumped in his seat as he caught sight of what was going on. "*Jesus, Mary and Joseph!*" he muttered. "El, you be careful with those. They were my grandpa's!"

"Yes, Dad. I know," she called sweetly over her shoulder to him. Another small twitch of her neck, and the knick-knacks had all stacked themselves neatly into the empty space between the TV and the antenna. Mike gingerly moved his hand away, and stepped back around for another quick peek at the TV screen.

"Yeah, this is definitely perfect," he exclaimed with an adoring look at his girlfriend. "Great thinking, El!"

El smiled, grabbed a tissue from her stash next to the couch, and swiped lazily at her nose. Then her eyes widened in amazement. "Oh! Mike! Quick! The ball!" She motioned excitedly for him to come sit next to her.

Mike was on the couch in two quick bounces. He slipped his hand into hers and snuggled gratefully against her warm soft body. "Just in time," he murmured, indicating the large countdown timer in the bottom right corner of the screen.

"*Eleven-five-seven, four-three,*" she whispered to him with a small laugh, draping one of Hopper's big warm blankets over them both. "Should have made you hold the antenna a bit longer."

Mike made another face at her. "Then you'd be all alone, and you'd be all *sad* that you didn't have *me* to cuddle up next to when the clock

strikes midnight on January 1st," he teased. "You'd have to wait 365 days for another chance. Wouldn't *that* be a horrible thought?"

She pushed him away gleefully. "But I *didn't*. So there." Her gaze tracked back to the crowds and colorful imagery on the TV screen. "Times Square. New York City," she breathed, reading the caption that had just appeared out loud. "Mike? Do you think we could go one day?"

Mike touched her face in a tender gesture. "Oh El, I'd love to go *anywhere* with you. Hawkins is a tiny speck on the map compared to New York. This summer, when it's safer for you to be out in the world, we could ask my mom and dad if they could take us on a roadtrip? Hopper's been there too. Maybe he can tell you all about it sometime."

"Yes! That would be so bitchin'," she proclaimed, eyes lighting up at the thought.

11:58:50. *You can see the people looking up now. That's what they're looking at. It's a ball that's made up of 200 fifteen watt red balls.*

He grabbed her arm. "Look, El! Just over a minute to go now." The screen had flicked back to the big red apple teetering ponderously on top of its flagpole, 80 feet above the roof of the Times Tower.

Eleven gasped. "It's moving!" She shook her curls, and the TV volume rose a couple of notches at her mind's command. "Why is it an apple?" she inquired curiously.

"Because that's New York's nickname. *The Big Apple*." Mike stared at the screen, only half-aware of Dick Clark's frantic commentary as the time ticked closer to midnight. He'd watched the ball drop many times since he was little, but this was the first ever time he'd experienced it with a girl cuddled up next to him. His beloved Eleven. The pair giggled at each other as they watched the giant red contraption wobble its way awkwardly down the flagpole.

El leaned forward in anticipation and clutched Mike's leg, then her hand slid dangerously close to his crotch and stayed there. He wriggled in surprise, expecting Hopper to suddenly appear in a fit of

rage to wrench them apart, but his paranoia only lasted a split second before he realized that El's deftly arranged blanket and the angle of the couch provided them with more than an adequate amount of concealment. He slid a hand up under her sweater in response, and she melted at the familiar feeling of his fingers against her warm breast. He could feel her heartbeat starting to quicken.

"Do boyfriends and girlfriends like... doing *this*... on New Years' Eve?" she whispered naughtily to him.

He blushed and nibbled on her ear. "What do *you* think?"

11:59:30. *Here we go. Thirty seconds, wait 'til you hear the excitement when it hits. They are gonna go bananas.*

El nuzzled against Mike's shock of thick black hair, breathing in the fresh scent of his shampoo. She still couldn't believe how lucky she was to be spending her first actual New Years' with the boy she loved more than anything else in the entire universe. Her fingers began to dance around the growing bulge in his sweatpants and she smiled to herself when she felt him squirm some more.

"El?" he hissed urgently. "Hop... *Hopper*..."

"Can't see us," she finished for him. She pressed herself tightly against Mike's body, watching the final few seconds count themselves down on the screen, waiting for exactly the right moment.

12:00:00. *To you and yours, a Happy New Year!*

The giant *1985* on the TV screen lit up as El drew Mike's face towards hers in one smooth motion, their lips meeting in an emotional, sensual, hungering kiss.

And as the final few bars of *Auld Lang Syne* played over the roaring of the crowds on the television's tinny speaker, they broke apart with a combined, breathless gasp.

"Happy New Year, Mage," he professed to her. "I love you."

"Happy New Year, Paladin," she purred back. "I love *you* more."

They cuddled for another few minutes, watching the camera slowly cut and pan across the masses and masses of people out celebrating. Then El risked a look over her shoulder at the dining table, and her eyes went wide. She poked Mike in amazement. "Look!" she blurted out with a giggle.

Mike's gaze followed her trembling finger, and then he let out a quiet guffaw of his own.

At some point in the last five minutes, Hopper had nodded off in his chair. And he'd *completely* missed the ball drop.

Figured a second half full of fluffiness (and a teeny bit of smut) would balance out the ominous first half :)

16. The Power Couple

Season 3 is here, and I'm just gonna come out and say that it hit me in the feels *way* harder than any piece of serialized TV has any right to. But since this story is set in an earlier and happier time, I'm sort of glad it won't upset the dynamic too much. It's just hard to write *anything* knowing what the status quo is now.

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 7, 1985

The Power Couple

*Life for you's been less than kind
So take a number, stand in line
We've all been sorry, we've all been hurt
But how we survive
Is what makes us who we are
- **Survive**, Rise Against*

Considering the artful way in which they'd disappeared straight after fifth period, the rest of the party hadn't been all that concerned when afternoon recess ended without any sign of Mike and Eleven. It wasn't until they'd all reconvened in the AV room after school did they learn about the unexpected turn of events.

"Holy shit. Then what did you do?" Max demanded. They were all sitting in a loose circle around the Heathkit, listening incredulously as Mike and El recounted their disturbing run-in with the random bully.

El fidgeted and glanced at the redhead teen. "Told him I'm not a retard. To leave us alone," she admitted.

Lucas whistled softly. Just like the others, he'd continued on to his final two classes of the day none the wiser. "Damn, El. *Damn*. That could have ended badly. But good on you for standing up to that wastoid. I was wondering why you and Mike seemed a bit shook up during history class."

"Son of a bitch. You didn't use your powers on him?" Dustin exclaimed.

"Don't be *stupid*, Dustin." Max shot him a withering look. "You think things are bad now? Imagine what'll happen the moment everybody finds out El has special powers."

"Okay, okay, *jeez* Mayfield. You didn't know him, Mike?"

"Nope. Some asshole kid who used to hang out with Troy I guess." Mike had slumped in his chair, a numb look on his face.

The mere mention of Troy's name chilled the atmosphere in the room by a few degrees, and no one else felt like saying anything more. El reached out to grab her boyfriend's hand in a comforting gesture. She still felt a bit rattled, but could tell Mike was far more upset than her about the whole situation. *Poor Mike*, she thought. He and the other boys had put up with the relentless persecution for almost all of their school lives. It was a vastly different kind of torture to the lab, but equally as cruel.

Will finally broke the gloomy silence with an annoyed sigh. "I-I still can't believe you were caught making out in a *janitor's closet!*" he exclaimed. "During recess! You... you couldn't just wait until, like, now? *After* school?" The others all traded uneasy glances. Will hardly ever lost his temper, but right then he seemed to be skating fairly close to the edge.

"We thought you and El just wanted some quiet time together, since you didn't really get a chance during lunch," declared Lucas. "But this is next level, man."

Mike and El stared down at the floor, red-faced with contrition. Another awkward silence descended upon the group.

"Hopper must *never* find out about this," Mike finally muttered.

"Not from us, but still pretty sure he's gonna," Dustin said, then shook his head and blinked. "Wait. So was I the only one who *correctly* guessed you two went to make whoopee somewhere?"

"Gross, Dustin," Max groaned. She turned to Eleven. "El? Maybe we

should talk about there being a right time and place for certain things."

Mike looked up sharply. "No! It's... it's my fault too. I... I should have been sensible enough to give El the right message." He squeezed her hand to indicate he wasn't mad. "I keep forgetting you're still adjusting to life outside the lab."

Lucas sighed. "First day back at school and already there's enough juicy gossip about the party to write a book about. Max and me are really gonna have to keep things on the down-low."

Max grabbed her boyfriend's arm. "Lucas, *no!* Don't be an idiot. Plenty of kids our age are going out now, that's perfectly normal." She cast a worried glance at her brunette friend. "El and Mike... they're just a lot further along on their journey than we are."

"You can say that again," Dustin laughed. "They're up to like, third and a quarter base already. Making whoopee at recess. *Rrrrooo-OW!*" His creepy signature purr was cut short by a quick jab in the side from Max.

"The more rumors keep piling up, the longer it's gonna take to ride them out," Will fretted.

"Yo *Will*, just *chill*." Dustin massaged his ribs where Max had jabbed him. "What's got you all worked up anyway?"

Will gave him a baleful look. "I kept getting those annoying notes. *Every single* class today," he seethed. "I have a bad feeling one of the popular kids has taken notice of El and is looking for a way to score, or something." He shifted his glance across to her. "Something terrible could happen after this new rumor gets out and I'm frustrated that we won't be able to stop it."

"Oh, come on Will," Max exclaimed in an incredulous tone. "After all the party's been through... Demogorgons, crazy scientists, Demo-dogs, Mind Flayer, the *Upside Down*... you're saying we're gonna meet our match in a bunch of asshole kids? Are you on some new meds, or what?"

"Yeah Will, you're not usually this edgy," Lucas quipped. "Sounds like someone's idea of a cruel joke and they've succeeded in wearing you down. Max is right. Whatever you think might happen, I'm *sure* we can figure out a way of dealing with it."

"Or El can just use her powers to scare them off," Dustin insisted.

"*What the hell*, Dustin!" Mike exclaimed. His nerves were starting to get a bit frazzled, too. "We just told you, things would get even worse if people find out."

"Can't use my powers to hurt people," El said quietly, sharing a tense look with her boyfriend. "One of Dad's new rules." She knew Mike would defend her to the end of the universe and beyond, but physically he would be no match for some of the other teens at Hawkins Middle if they ever tried anything beyond name-calling. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried her hardest not to think about it.

"Hey. HEY! I didn't mean it like that," Dustin interjected, a gleam in his eye. "Like El just said, she can't use her powers to hurt anyone. But what if... she uses them to cause some kind of distraction, or diversion to chase them away?"

"Uhh, Dustin? That's still too risky," Mike objected, but his friend wasn't having a bar of it.

"Everybody's seen *Carrie*, right? Or *Firestarter*? How about *Ghostbusters*?" Dustin was getting really animated as he continued outlining his crazy plan. "What better way to stop people from bugging El than for weird things to start happening if they're mean or creepy to her?"

"That's not fair on El," Will pointed out. "We're supposed to be giving her a shot at normal life. This would just make her into that scary girl round school no one ever wants to talk to."

"Besides, I think her occasional nosebleeds might give it away," Lucas added. "This isn't a D&D campaign, Dustin. There's real life consequences to worry about."

Now it was Dustin's turn to sag in his chair. He threw his hands up in

a screw-it gesture. "Okay. Fine, I give up. Forget it. It's not like every single person's gonna be mean to El. If she only messes with people who are out to mess with her, we could use the rumor mill to our advantage for once." He glared at each of his friends in turn. "C'mon, it's not like anyone else has any better ideas!"

"At lunchtime you were saying we should let all this die down naturally," Max grumbled. "What changed *your* mind?"

"That was before Mike and El got caught making whoopee," Dustin shot back at her.

El covered her face with her hands. "*Stop saying that!*" Mike bellowed.

"Okay, *okay*, I'm sorry," Dustin apologized. "But like Lucas said, this is next level shit now. Somebody's clearly got Will on edge too, and once this new gossip gets around people aren't just gonna be talking behind El's back anymore..." He trailed off with a despairing shrug.

"Well, so far whoever's been writing those notes hasn't shown themselves," Will mused. His earlier flash of anger had been replaced by something more thoughtful. "Mike? El? I'm curious to know exactly what it was that other kid said to you in the hallway earlier."

Mike sighed heavily. "Does it even matter, Will? It makes me angry thinking about it."

"Hear me out!" Will argued. "Dustin said something really brilliant before."

"Oh, that'll be a first," snorted Lucas. Beside him, Max let out a stifled giggle.

Dustin shot them a venomous look. "Go on," he grouched to Will. "What did I say that was so brilliant?"

"You said we should use the rumor mill to our advantage. So that's gotten me thinking." Will swiveled around in his chair to face Mike again. "For example. Take what that kid said to you, and put a positive spin on it somehow."

Mike stared at the floor again, his face slowly turning a shade of

crimson. "He... he said the word going round is that El and me hooked up at the Snow Ball," he finally muttered. El squirmed in her seat but didn't say anything. "I... I don't see where you're going with this, Byers."

"You two were hogging the damn dance floor all night," Dustin affirmed. "With pretty much the *entire* school watching. Not hard for people to form their own conclusions from that."

"Sounds like typical exaggeration," Max countered. "One kiss isn't what I'd call a hookup. But... El? Mike? Remember that group of popular girls from third period?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Oh, *them*," he growled. "God they were annoying. They wouldn't leave us alone!"

"Yes, but they weren't making fun of you, were they?" Max's eyes glittered in amusement. "In fact, I think they were trying their hardest to get El to spill her secrets. Or better yet, join their little gang."

Mike stared at her. "I think you're reaching, Mayfield."

"I know what I saw, Wheeler. You boys *just don't get it* sometimes." Max crossed her arms and looked at El. "Those girls were ready to treat El like the Hawkins Middle version of prom queen. Surely that's a step in the right direction."

"Mike? They *were* being nice to us," El agreed quietly.

"Yeah, c'mon Mike. When was the last time that crowd *ever* said anything nice to you?" Lucas remarked. "I'd call that a small victory. Now you just have to act like you and El really are a power couple and all the nasty shit no longer has any effect. Am I right?"

"Exactly, Lucas. That's how we spin things *upside down*," Will laughed. "So it's public knowledge that Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper are a deal. And a pretty *big* deal, at that. Seems fairly logical for them to be hooking up at the Snow Ball."

"And in the janitor's closet," Dustin teased, to Mike's obvious discomfort.

"Will? I told that bully... Mike is my *boyfriend*," El added.

Max's jaw dropped. "Holy shit, El!" she repeated. "That's bold."

Lucas nodded slowly. "But it's more proof. A rumor's no longer a rumor once confirmed," he murmured to himself. Then his eyes narrowed in thought. "Wait. Hey, Will? Maybe next time you get one of those annoying notes, you should just write *sorry she's already got a boyfriend* and pass it back."

Max laughed. "That's *also* very bold, Stalker. But it gets right to the point, doesn't it?"

Lucas grinned at her. "Dustin's not the only one around here full of brilliant ideas."

"Yeah, okay... great," Mike spoke up. "So that's two rumors taken care of, provided things don't backfire spectacularly. Which leaves... ninety-eight to go?"

Max rolled her eyes at him. "Oh loosen up, Wheeler. It's a start. If this works it'll take some of the heat off you and El," she pointed out. "This is a *bit* more constructive than just riding things out with no control of what could happen."

El looked longingly at Mike. "Mike? We could... give it a try?" Her eyes shimmered with hope.

Mike returned her gaze, and finally allowed himself a wry smile. "It's not like anyone else has any better ideas," he replied.

Tap tap tap tap. Their faces all turned in surprise towards the open door.

"Hi kids!" Mrs. Byers was standing in the doorway with an inquisitive look on her face. "Not interrupting anything important, am I? Didn't realize you had AV club today. Been waiting outside school for the last forty-five minutes."

"Oh! Hi Mom... sorry to keep you waiting," Will apologized. "Uhh... we didn't actually have AV club today. Just figured it would be better to wait here than out in the cold, and I guess time ran away on us."

"Yeah, sorry Mrs. Byers," Dustin chimed in. "Didn't mean to get you all worried." The others all nodded solemnly.

Joyce let out a quiet laugh. "It's okay, I understand. But now I really do have to get Will... and Mike, and El home." She focused on the couple just in time to catch their quick looks of astonishment at each other. "Ready to go?"

"Yes ma'am." Mike stood up and began to pull his jacket out of his backpack before an odd expression crossed his face, and he quickly moved to zip it firmly closed instead. He hoisted it onto his shoulders and extended a hand to his girlfriend. "Ready, El?"

The Pinto's tired engine spluttered into life, and lurched away from the curb with a series of mechanical groans as Will and his mother began chattering earnestly about their respective day's events. El stretched out and rested her head on Mike's shoulder, closing her eyes in relief, finally glad that her first day of school was over. Mike slipped a comforting arm around her, and turned to look out the window at the world outside. More dark clouds had started to gather overhead, and there was a chill in the air which signaled snow could be on the way.

"El? Mike? Sorry if I surprised you back in the AV room earlier. Hop has to work late, some urgent business for Mayor Kline came up," Joyce said, addressing the couple in the back seat. "Mike, it's fine for you to stay with El again tonight. You can both have dinner with us, and I'll drop you at the cabin afterwards."

El snuggled gratefully against Mike in response to Aunt Joyce's words. "Thank you," she murmured.

"Y-yeah. Thanks, Mrs. Byers. And... Hopper too, I guess," Mike replied.

"No problem at all." Joyce's eyes flicked towards the rear view mirror, and crinkled slightly. "So, Mike? El? How was school?"

Jeez, that's a lot of dialogue. The more I continued writing, the

more this chapter ended up reading like a teleplay, which was sort of nice for a change. I'm gonna try my hardest to ensure S3 doesn't derail any of the upcoming plot points I've got mapped out in my mind.

I may even have to try my hand at a S3 oneshot to get the monkey off my back.

17. Good Outweighs Bad (plus Author's Note)

Back again with a short interlude chapter. However I've included a long author's note at the end if you feel like having a look. It covers some of my more in-depth thoughts on Season 3 Mileven (spoiler alert, of course).

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 7, 1985

Good Outweighs Bad

*And the way I feel about you
Makes my heart long to be free
Every time I look into your eyes
I'm helplessly aware
That the someone I've been searching for is right there*
- **Hold On To The Nights**, Richard Marx

The wind was starting to pick up through the trees as Eleven and Mike climbed the steps towards the front door of Hopper's cabin.

"You kids have a good night," Joyce called softly after them. She'd stopped at the bottom and was using her torch to guide the pair in the dark. "Hop didn't tell me what time he'd be home, but things sounded pretty hectic when he phoned earlier. Hopefully whatever he's working on for the mayor won't keep him out too late."

"Night Mrs. Byers!" Mike turned and gave Joyce a small wave.

"Thank you for dinner," El added.

"You're welcome! Stay safe," Joyce replied, and the porch dipped into darkness as she made her way back to the car.

Next to him Mike felt rather than saw El shake her head in one brisk motion, and heard the sound of the locks sliding back one after another. The door opened with a squeak and the teens stumbled thankfully into the snug little house.

He flailed around for the lightswitch as El closed and barred the door again behind them. "Doesn't that get annoying?"

She nodded, dropping her satchel on the floor with a quiet thud and making her way over to her tissue stash so she could wipe her nose. "Yes. Dad said he might get a new door one day. When it's a bit safer. One *without* five locks this time."

Mike shed his backpack and walked up to her. "One day," he repeated with a grin, pulling her close as they collapsed onto the couch together. El stared into her boyfriend's eyes and eagerly pressed her lips against his.

And then the rafters echoed with the sounds of two enthusiastic teenagers kissing for a good long while.

"Brr... it's freezing. I should probably get the fire started," Mike finally panted. He slid his hand out from under El's jacket, very slowly and rather unwillingly, and started to haul himself off the couch. "It... it's so much nicer making out next to a nice warm fire."

Her hand grabbed his. "No, let me." She shifted her gaze to the squat little woodburner and the door swung open at her command. Two logs levitated themselves off the small pile next to it and flew inside, followed by a small amount of kindling. At the same time, Hopper's Zippo rose off the side table and whisked across the room, flipping itself open along the way.

Mike watched his girlfriend casually exercise her powers in their quest for a little warmth, his emotions a little mixed. He slipped his hand back to her warm breast and teasingly undid another couple of buttons on the front of her blouse. "Showoff," he muttered, finding a nipple and caressing it tenderly. "But I really don't think you should be doing that."

El writhed delightfully against his touch, but her telekinetic movements remained steadily precise. She waited for the pile of sticks and newspaper to ignite before carefully returning the Zippo to its rightful place, and closed the door of the woodburner with one last delicate flick of her wrist. She then moved to place her hand invitingly at the junction of his legs, grinning when she felt him stir

involuntarily at her touch. His belt buckle began to twitch. "Remember... I could do... *other* things too. If you wanted?"

Mike trembled at the thought of what El's powers were capable of. He thought back to the night she'd closed the Gate. *November 5, 1984*. Just over two months ago. The teens had made it back to the Byerses' after their adventure in the tunnels well ahead of everyone else, thanks to Steve's efficient piloting of the 'borrowed' Camaro on their return journey. Hopper had nearly written off his truck pulling into Joyce's driveway, Mike remembered, in his haste to get Eleven back to safety so she could recover from her devastating ordeal. As soon as Mike heard the screech of tyres and the sound of flying gravel outside he'd bolted out the front door, and was up against the passenger window of the Blazer before it had even finished rolling to a halt. El's face had been deathly flushed and she was slipping in and out of consciousness more rapidly than should have been the norm. She'd lost enough blood that Mike had been so sure, so *afraid*, that he was going to lose her forever.

Once she'd made her recovery, he'd reiterated to her often and loudly that he still couldn't bear the thought of her hurting herself again, especially not to make *him* feel good. The amount of suffering she'd already been through in her young life had been more than enough to last *eleven* lifetimes. He reached for the box of tissues. "No," he whispered to her firmly, dabbing gently at her nose, wiping the blood away once again. "You have a gift, El, but it comes at a cost. That cost isn't worth seeing you suffer every time."

El, of course, couldn't resist being a little stubborn. It was a trait she'd picked up from being stuck with nobody except Hopper for company the past year. But mainly she wanted to make him realize that what it boiled down to, at the end of the day, was the importance of her freedom to make her *own* decisions. "Mike? I can control my powers better now. Doesn't hurt as much anymore," she asserted, looking up into his worried eyes. "And you know about my rules. It's... it's *okay*."

"I know, El!" Mike exclaimed, quickly looking away. "But I don't want you using them... *like that*... on me. We... we've been *over this* already."

"But you've already seen what happens," El insisted, clutching at his

arm again. "When... you make *me* feel good."

She had the satisfaction of seeing him frown just then.

"I don't understand, El?" came Mike's genuinely puzzled response.

"You know," she answered quietly. "Whenever you make me feel good..." She trailed off and touched her nose, then her ear, then pointed to the bloodied tissue still in Mike's other hand. "It hurts me too. But the good feelings, they... it... *outweighs* the hurt." That was a new word she'd learnt from Max during one of their recent English study sessions. *The good outweighs the bad*, Max had said, before launching into a dopey explanation that had made the two of them giggle like mad. *Say you're with Mike in your bedroom, which is good. And Hopper is glaring at you from the doorway, which is bad. But being with Mike outweighs the fact Hopper is watching.*

Mike sucked in his breath as realization hit him like a freight train. "Oh, El!" he cried, bowing his head. "I-I should have known."

El reached out and turned his face back towards her own. "Mike?" She hoped he could see the reality of her situation more clearly now. "Do you see why I don't mind? Whenever I ask. *It's my choice*. Because I love you."

"I love you more, and I *can't* lose you again," he sighed, pulling her close to him in a sorely wanted embrace, all of the built-up tension finally fading away. "I... I think I understand now. We may need to work out some kind of compromise on this one, El."

"C-O-M-promise?" she repeated playfully, reciting Hopper's old quote. "Halfway happy?"

"Yeah. C-O-M-promise," he grinned at her.

El gave him a huge smile, threw her arms around his neck, and leaned into him for another passionate kiss. The fire crackled in the background as it slowly started to build up heat and ferocity, somewhat paralleling the electrifying atmosphere in the room.

"So when's Hop going to install a phone in this old dump?" Mike grumbled once they'd finally had enough of kissing. The look in El's

Eleven motioned to Mike to grab a pencil and some paper. "V-E-R-Y-L-A-T-E..." she slowly spelled. "A-F-T-E-R-1-2-D-O-N-T-W-A-I-T-4-M-E."

"Very late. After twelve," Mike murmured as he scribbled the letters onto the page. "Don't wait for me. Shit. That must be some case he's working on."

El blinked. "Yes. Oh, wait..." She broke off as the transmitter began to bleep again.

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"I-S-M-I-K-E-T-H-E-R-E," she mouthed, then looked up at him with a grin. "Is Mike there?"

Mike blushed. "I... I suppose you can't really lie to him. He'll have spoken to Will's mom for sure."

El hefted the intercom and began to compose her reply.

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Yes, he is.

Hopper's answer came back almost immediately.

"O-K-B-E-G-O-O-D-U-2," Eleven whispered.

"We will," Mike breathed into her ear. She thumbed the intercom button, swatting at him with her other hand when he nibbled on her earlobe tenderly.

•_____ • •_____ •• •____•• •____••

There was a slightly longer pause, then the speaker erupted into another series of quick staccato bursts. Mike yelped and fumbled for his pencil as El quietly called out the letters again one by one.

"B-E-U-P-4-S-C-H-O-O-L-B-Y-6-3-0."

"Got it," Mike acknowledged, scribbling furiously.

"D-O-N-T-D-O-A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G-S-T-U-P..."

"Oh *for God's sake* Hopper," Mike interrupted as the speaker finally fell silent. "Thanks, El. I can pretty much guess the rest."

She stuck her tongue out at him playfully, and peered at the digital clock on the microwave oven. "Seven-one-three," she recited. "*Twelve* is less than five hours away."

Mike threw a glance at the now roaring fire in the corner of the cabin, and gave her one of his famous goofy grins. He took her hand again and murmured into her ear, "So it is. Remember what I said about making out in front of the fire?"

Sorry for the short one. I've been in a bit of a funk ever since Season 3 ended but luckily this plot thread ended up flowing well.

SPOILER ALERT - if you haven't completed Season 3 yet, *please don't read any further!*

So by now, a lot of you will have finished watching the new season, and will probably have the same theories, thoughts and questions as me (and the rest of the fandom). Before I get into my spiel I just want to reiterate that overall, I *loved* S3 and I'm still hooked as badly as I was way back in 2016 when Stranger Things first hit our screens. Now to begin the long wait until Season 4.

I did appreciate the few scenes El and Mike shared together during S3, and yes they were very sweetly depicted at certain points. It gives me enough knowledge that Mileven will still live on in S4. And that's reflected in what I decided to name this chapter :)

I'm not going to dwell on the ending (which yes, I'll admit, made me bawl my eyes out). But I do want to say that S3 Mileven confused the *ever living heck* out of me. It steamrolled any of the relief we got from El and Mike's really heartfelt reunion at the end of S2, which was the payoff for pretty much every fan, and one reason our emotional investment continued to stay extremely strong going into S3.

I have read a few dissertations around the need for El and Mike to start creating more space in their relationship, and I do believe that was the intention, and it did eventually work out by the end.

On subsequent rewatches I now sympathize more with Mike than I originally did, and I may have been a bit rash in originally describing him as a *shouty insufferable dick*. I did feel that his disrespect of Hopper was what triggered the downward spiral into getting his ass dumped, which then fed into his odd characterization for the next few episodes (i.e. it really was a product of his situation) but I can now see that Max really projected a lot of her own crap onto poor El, which led to most of the frustrating tension between her and a *very* hurt and confused Mike.

Oh, and don't get me started on El moving away. Thank the stars that she gets the credit for finally taking the initiative to give Mike the all important "*I love you too*" in the epilogue. So at least they are still committed to each other by the end of the season.

Also - Mike never saw Hopper's letter, or even realized El had found it and was crying in the other room, completely devastated and alone. I guess it was hers and only hers to see, but not having Mike around to even comfort her in a time of need and grief came off as extremely cold to me :(

So the way I've written El and Mike in *Winter with Eleven* is possibly at odds with their characterization by the time S3 rolls around. I wasn't expecting that, but hey... by rights I shouldn't complain. These aren't my characters after all. I'll make my peace with it.

Never fear, I'll keep writing until my plots run dry, but my enthusiasm has been quite deflated these past few days and it really does mess with the flow of things.

Enough ranting from me. See you next chapter! Comments appreciated as always.

18. Trouble in Paradise?

The hole in my heart caused by S3 Mileven is slowly healing, and the creative juices, they flow again.

P.S. this chapter, warning: **MAXIMUM FLUFF and some SMUT**

Note - I don't own Stranger Things.

January 8, 1985

Trouble in Paradise?

Lovers in the rain

Oblivious to pain

When the dreaming ends

Will we still be the same?

- **Lovers In The Rain**, The Night Flight Orchestra

Eleven waited impatiently on the path next to the main entrance of Hawkins Middle, scanning the faces of everyone walking past, hoping to catch sight of someone, *anyone* familiar. She shivered and tightly clutched a small blue book to her chest almost as if to ward off the winter's chill.

Mike elbowed his way past the crowd of other kids leaving school for the day, pushing open the double doors and sauntering out into the cold January afternoon.

When she finally saw him, she squealed in delight. "Mike!" She sidestepped the throng to rush up and envelop him in a crushing hug. Her forehead touched his tenderly.

"Hey Mage," he whispered, his mouth hovering tantalizingly close to hers. "How was the afternoon tutoring session?"

"Fine," she answered simply. "Better if my Paladin was there."

Mike managed a small smile. He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair back behind his girlfriend's ear. "I know, I know. I wish I could be there with you too. One-on-one tutoring can get pretty

lonely. But it's the most effective way to learn stuff."

"The tutor gave me a book to take home. To practice." She excitedly held up the book she'd been carrying for Mike to see.

"*Using Good English, volume 8*," he read out loud to himself. "But what about the first seven volumes?"

El giggled at him. "I... don't need them. She says I'm *good enough* to start here."

Mike sighed affectionately. He still remembered the first words El had ever said to him. *No. Yes. Night, Mike.* "She's right, too. Your communication skills are so much better now, El."

She ducked her head shyly at her boyfriend's genuine compliment, and as she looked away to place the book back into her satchel a familiar voice called out to them, "Lovebirds! Hey!" It was Will.

Mike waved back at him in greeting. "Byers!"

The smaller boy walked up to the couple with a sly grin on his face. "Giving the Power Couple thing a go, huh?" he asked conspiratorially. "I noticed some of the other kids checking you two out before. I think more than a few of 'em were impressed."

Mike's face went red. He hadn't actually given it any more thought in the twenty four hours since they'd held their scrappy little war-council in the AV room. Besides, El had been the one to initiate their very public display of affection just then, and he'd been so happy to see her that he'd simply melted into her arms without a second thought. She was the love of his life, after all.

"I... guess so," he answered absently. "Don't really want to overthink it though," he added.

Will clapped him on the shoulder. "Yeah, good call. If Lucas were here, he'd be saying the trick is to make it look *natural*." He focused his attention on El. "El's pretty good at it, from what I just saw."

Now it was El's turn to blush. She gave Will one of her dimple-faced smiles and took Mike's hand.

"Speaking of which, where the hell is Lucas? And Max? And Dustin?" Mike commented, suddenly feeling like he needed to switch topics. "They usually beat me out the door on Tuesdays."

"That's what you get for making puppy eyes at El all through lunch and not paying attention to our banter," Will chuckled. "Lucas and Max went straight to the arcade to check out the new Dragon Buster game that just arrived. Dustin went to the library to return some books. As for me, I'm going straight home. What are you and El gonna do?"

"Mom's coming to get us. Hop's picking El up from my place later," Mike told him. "I *think*, anyway. He got in pretty late last night, and couldn't really guarantee he wouldn't be doing the same thing again today."

"He was grumbling on the way to school," Eleven chimed in. "About Starcourt."

"The new mall? That's gotta be the urgent business for the mayor that Mom mentioned. Wonder what's going on there," Will pondered. "People shoplifting doesn't sound important enough for the chief of police to be bothering with. Gotta be more serious than that."

Mike shrugged, and squeezed El's hand. "We probably don't wanna know. All I can say is, lucky El and me both keep a spare bag of clothes at each others' houses now."

"Well, I wouldn't be complaining if I got to have sleepovers all the time with the person I love," Will broke off as he caught sight of his mother's brown Pinto pulling into the driveway at last. "Hey, my mom's here. I'll see you both tomorrow, okay?"

"Bye Will!" El answered for the two of them. Joyce was waving excitedly from the car, and El raised her arm to acknowledge her, then turned back to Mike. She rotated his wrist slightly so she could glance at the time on his watch. "Three-zero-nine," she recited. "Is your mom coming soon?"

"I hope so. If the weather was warmer and the roads weren't so slushy we could have biked home by now," Mike replied, his tone going a

little absent again as he watched Joyce and Will drive off. "Mom's usually here by now, but sometimes Holly sleeps a bit longer in the afternoon, and she has to wake her up before driving out to school. Or maybe she's doing the groceries on the way. Or she's been waiting for her casserole to cook."

Eleven smiled a bittersweet smile at him, her thoughts shifting to how domestic and innocent Mike's life sounded at times. A far cry from how her own life had once been, but things were so much better now. *Different*. She had a dad. Friends. She had *Mike*. Someone to talk with, laugh with, to cry with, to hold and cherish and just... *be with*. Maybe that's what her life was becoming now, too. Domestic. Innocent. She sort of liked the sound of that.

The freezing cold wind picked up speed just then, cutting into El's thoughts and making her shiver again as she stood on the path next to Mike. She pointed to one of the benches down the side of the admin block which some other kids had just vacated. "Can we wait over there?" It was somewhat sheltered and out of the wind, at least, and they could still keep an eye on the driveway for any sign of Mrs. Wheeler.

He gripped her hand tighter. "Good idea, I'm freezing my ass off. Let's go." They wandered slowly over to the bench, shed their bags, and each sat down with a satisfied groan. A group of other students watched them studiously as they walked past, but otherwise left them alone.

El reclined against Mike, nestling closer to his warm body. "Better," she murmured. "School makes me so *tired*." Her eyelids drooped and closed momentarily.

He leaned into her, stroking her hair softly in response. "Oh El, two days in and you have *no* idea," he laughed. "Wait 'til you've had to endure *eight years* of it. But there's only half a year to go, and then you and me, we'll be off to high school together in the fall."

She opened her eyes again and looked at him then. "But... not *together*... really," she whispered gloomily. "I still need a tutor."

"Yeah, but maybe only once or twice a week, depending on how

much more you pick up before summer. And we've got *four whole years* of high school to spend with each other," Mike encouraged. "El? Give yourself some credit. In the time we've known each other you've learned *so much* about *so many* things. You're *so* amazing. And *so* smart. And I'm *so damn lucky* to... to have you in my life," he sniffled, his emotions suddenly threatening to overwhelm him.

El touched his face tenderly, wiping away the tears when they came. "No, Mike. *I'm* lucky. *You* found *me* on Mirkwood, remember? *You saved me.*" Her wide, innocent eyes had started to brim wetly, too.

Mike smiled sadly at her. "We... we found *each other*. We-we're *both* lucky," he finally compromised with a mournful stammer. "And don't... *don't ever* forget that *you saved me too*. That day in the quarry. That day at Will's memorial. That night the Demogorgon attacked. From the Demo-dogs. You closed the Gate and... and stopped the *Mind Player*. You saved our friends too. You saved us all. And that's one of the reasons I... I'll *always* love you, El."

"I-I'll *always* love *you* more," she responded candidly, turning to Mike and embracing him with a quiet sob.

The young lovers sat huddled together on that cold, hard bench outside the school for a while longer, not even caring if any other kids, or teachers, or parents were still around to watch. They held on to each other tightly, letting their combined angst give way to hopeful optimism, silence speaking louder than any more words could.

Mike eventually disentangled his head from the crook of El's neck, and checked his watch one more time. "Damn. 3:23. Mom must still be waiting for her casserole to cook," he joked in a trembling voice, running a gentle hand up and down his girlfriend's back.

El gave him a small smile. "I like your mom's casserole. School lunch is *so gross*." She wrinkled her nose and made a face. "Even *Hopper* can cook better."

Mike chuckled at her overly careful inflection of the word *gross*. "Hah, you've been hanging around Max too much. You sound exactly like her when she... wait, what the hell was that?" He broke off abruptly

and El's eyes widened as they both caught the muffled hiss of an incoming transmission from his backpack.

"Your Supercom!" she breathed.

"Mike, do you copy? This is Dustin, over. Do you copy, over?"

Mike quickly opened his bag and fished out his walkie talkie. "Dustin? I copy. Are you at the library? Over," he replied, carefully hiding a grimace and hoping he didn't sound too choked up with emotion still. *Typical Henderson, calling at the most inopportune moment.*

Fortunately, the connection was crackly enough for Dustin not to notice. "Good, you're still in range. Yeah I'm at the library, but won't be here for too long," came the reply. He was trying his hardest to keep his voice low and urgent. "Is El with you, over?"

Mike held his Supercom out in front of El and hit Transmit. "Hi Dustin. Yes I am. Over," she answered into the mouthpiece.

"Hey El. Okay, cool. Copy that. Just thought you and Mike might wanna know I saw Hopper when Mom and me got to the library just now. Him and Deputy Powell were talking to a bunch of suits outside the Hawk Theater across the road. They didn't see me though. Over."

Mike frowned. "Suits? Government men? Over."

El clutched at his leg urgently. Her suddenly worried expression read *bad men? With Hopper?*

"Could've been, but I don't think so," Dustin admitted. "The mayor was there, and the theater owners too. Mom pointed them out. Thing is, they were all too far away for me to hear anything clearly at first, but then one of the suits started yelling something, and he sounded... very *angry*... and foreign? Over."

"*Foreign?*" Mike exclaimed incredulously. "Like, what kinda foreign? Over."

"Could've been Eastern Bloc? Not like full-on Russian though, it would've been too damn obvious. Hopper was sorta standing there,

doing that forehead thing he always does." There was no mistaking the amusement in Dustin's voice as he recounted that particular detail.

"Yes. That usually means he's annoyed," El giggled quietly to Mike, who rolled his eyes at the mental image.

Dustin quickly sobered as he continued, "Anyway, the dude was yelling something about how the new multiplex at the mall is gonna blow away the Hawk, and that they were all *fools* to think they could hold out against Starcourt Industries. And some of the other suits looked pretty mad, too. Over."

Mike looked pointedly at El. *Starcourt, again?* "Uhh, copy that. It must be related to the important business for the mayor Mrs. Byers was telling us about. Hopper wouldn't talk about it but he seemed pretty edgy this morning on the way to school, over."

"*Exactly*. Will filled us in at lunch, while you two were too busy making eyes at each other," Dustin gloated. "So that's why I *had* to call you. Anyway, that's my interesting gossip... I'd better sign off before the librarian kicks my ass for talking too loud in here. See you at school tomorrow. Don't swap too much spit, *lovebirds*. Over and out."

"Shut it, Dustin," Mike retorted. "But thanks for the info. Stay sharp. Over and out."

Eleven blinked, lost in her own thoughts for a moment. "Starcourt," she mused as Mike returned his Supercom to his backpack. "Aunt Joyce says it's big. And very pretty."

"Yeah, it is! They still haven't finished it yet, though," he answered. "Lots more shops are gonna be opening there before summer. You and me can have a look once it's fully open. We can go shopping, see a movie, go get *ice cream* together, it'll be like... like..."

"Like a *date*!" El finished for him with an excited gasp.

He gave her a goofy lopsided smile. "Yeah. Like a date. I promise."

"Oh Mike, I can't wait," El conceded, but her grip on Mike's thigh

tightened just a bit. "But I'm... *worried* about Dad."

"Hop's a big boy, El. He can take care of himself!" Mike's eyes twinkled momentarily as he gazed into hers. "And he didn't make it to chief of police by being a total dumbass. He'll get to the bottom of things soon enough. Bet this is the most exciting thing he's dealt with since he shut the Lab down. Since *you* closed the Gate." He drew her close and tweaked the tip of her nose reassuringly. "Like Will said, let's not complain too much. We get to spend more time together while Hopper's occupied."

"But... Dustin said there were *bad men*. The suits," El insisted. She had no doubts about her adoptive dad's resourcefulness either, but Dustin's urgency had been more than just a little contagious. And angry men in suits would *always* remind her of Papa and his evil goons. One Hopper against many angry men in suits was a pretty unfair match. One Hopper *and* one Eleven against many angry men in suits, on the other hand...

"Okay, maybe I *am* a bit worried too," Mike admitted, his own father's frequent ranting about Soviet Russians and spies and the Cold War floating to the surface of his mind. He took El's hands into his and clasped them reassuringly. "But I reckon Dustin's probably been watching *Red Dawn* again and got some accents muddled up. Those foreigners could have been from *anywhere*. Big companies are like that. My dad even works for one."

El's eyes were deep pools of simmering apprehension. "I... I don't want Dad to get into *trouble*. Scared I can't save him next time," she whispered, looking away from Mike, her heart beginning to pound. Yes, the menace of the Mind Flayer may have been averted for now, but a part of her still needed to remain alert for other potential threats to her loved ones. And then there had been the chilling *vision* she'd had on New Years' Day. Not just another nightmare. ***You let us in. And now you are going to have to let us stay.*** She *still* didn't understand what it meant, and *hadn't* wanted to bring it up again since then, preferring instead to push it to the back of her mind and get on with her exciting new life. But *somehow* she knew that one day she would have to face that seething, inexplicable danger again.

"Oh El," Mike exhaled softly, fighting against the feelings that were

threatening to come full circle once more. "A-after all you've been through. After all you've done for *me*. For *Hop*. For *Will*. For *everyone*. After all your sacrifices, you're... you're still willing to protect and fight for us. Sometimes I-I think that I *don't* deserve to have you in my life. None of us really deserve it."

"Mike. You gave me... *this* life. It's worth fighting for." She touched her forehead to his again, delicately and sincerely.

"You're *amazing*, El," he finally choked out. "You really are. Maybe... maybe we *should* try and talk to Hopper. Or Mrs. Byers at least. Let them know you're concerned about him working this case, ask how much time he might be spending away from you, and that you just wanna know he'll be alright."

El managed a tiny giggle despite the solemnity of the circumstances. "And *you* too, silly," she scolded.

"Fine, *we're* concerned about him working this case, and how much time he might be spending away from *us*," Mike grumped, conceding to her point. "And I *am*, I promise. But Hop won't care what I think, really. *You're* his daughter. I'm just the snotty kid who's trying to steal you away from him."

"No. *You matter* to him too. You're the one I want to be with forever," El persisted with determination. "My decision. He accepts it now. *You make me* whole."

Mike stared guiltily into his lap, knowing his girlfriend was right, even if he kept stubbornly refusing to see it. Hopper may have been a cranky alcoholic buffoon once upon a time, but in the year since El had come into the big man's life they'd all noticed the gradual transformation he'd undergone into eventual protector and father figure. Part of that transformation had involved reluctantly accepting Mike as part of his life too, even if Hop didn't really understand *why*. In the end it had been El who'd pointed out to Mike that her love for him, and Mike's reciprocal love for her, had simply been good enough reasons for Hopper's acceptance.

"See what I said before, El? You're smarter than you give yourself credit for," Mike confessed.

She smirked. "Smarter than Dustin?"

"Dustin's just a *smartass*. There's a difference." He smirked back. "But honestly, in your own way... yes, you *are* smarter than good old Dustin Henderson."

Eleven's expression totally melted, and she leaned into him, closing her eyes again with a contented sigh.

"Maybe we should go sit in the AV room, where it's nice and warm," Mike murmured after another few minutes of waiting. "Or sneak back into the janitor's closet..." He had the pleasure of seeing El blush and duck her head at the idea. "Or I can go call home from the office," he continued. "Mom may have forgotten about us."

"Oh! Wait," El answered, her eyes refocusing and catching sight of something behind Mike. "Over there?" He turned to look.

Sure enough, Karen's station wagon had pulled to a stop just shy of the path leading down to their resting spot. She tooted and rolled down the window when she caught sight of the two teens collecting their bags and hurriedly trotting towards the car. "Michael! Jane! I'm so sorry I'm late!" she called. There was a slight look of distress on her face. Beside her, Holly blinked and waved at the approaching pair.

"Hello Mrs. Wheeler," El said as she reached the car. "Hi Holly. What is wrong?"

"Did you burn the casserole?" Mike asked. He opened the door for El, and climbed in after her.

Mrs. Wheeler turned to him with a flustered sigh. "Oh, *Michael*. The casserole is fine, don't you worry. No, it's something else." She shoved the wagon's transmission into D, and began to drive out of the school grounds.

"So what's wrong then, Mom?" Mike's joking tone had been replaced with something more serious. Next to him, El watched with a concerned look on her face.

"Well, after Chief Hopper called mid-morning to ask if I could pick

you two up after school, I thought I'd get my hair done in town before coming out to collect you," Karen finally babbled. "So I arranged Holly's babysitter and booked an appointment for 1pm, hoping that'd give me plenty of time. But when I got to the salon, the door was *locked* with a bunch of scary looking men inside talking to the girls."

Mike threw a significant glance at El. The look of worry on his girlfriend's face had deepened even further. "We kinda know, Mom. Starcourt Industries?"

Karen's eyes flicked to the rear view mirror. "You do? How... never mind, maybe Hopper told you. Yes, *those* mall people," she huffed. "I ended up having to wait over an hour before they would leave. Those poor girls, they were all shaken up. I almost ended up canceling, but they insisted they could still fit me in. So that's why I'm late. I'm *really* sorry, kids!"

"No need to be, Mom. It's totally alright," Mike soothed.

"Dad... Hopper... wasn't there?" El asked inquisitively.

"No honey, but the girls wanted to call the station after those men had left the salon," Mrs. Wheeler replied to El. "And complain to the mayor's office too. They kept referring to it as *trouble in paradise*, and I sort of agree. Starcourt Mall is going to bring in all kinds of new businesses, but the stores which have been in Hawkins from the beginning might be in real trouble if they don't give in to the mall's demands." She set her face in grim determination. "I told the girls I knew your father, Jane, and I've got half a mind to have a word to him about it."

"You should," El replied. "The scary men sound like real mouth breathers."

"If Hop's starting to go all Magnum PI on this for the mayor, he might appreciate the information," Mike added with a shrug.

Karen managed a smile. "*Mouth breathers*, now that's a great description. Yes, I'll talk to Chief Hopper. He did mention the hours he's been working just to get this investigation off the ground, so

Jane might have to stay the night. Which is totally fine, of course. Well, here we are. Home again!" She maneuvered the station wagon into the driveway of the Wheeler house and cut the engine.

Mike closed the door to the basement with a final parting comment to his mother, and half-ran, half-jumped down the flight of stairs to where El sat waiting, absently flipping through channels on the TV with her mind.

She squealed when he dived onto the couch next to her and grabbed her wildly by the shoulders, planting a wet sloppy kiss on her forehead.

"Mike!" she laughed at him. "What is it?"

He sat back and looked invitingly at her. "Dinner's at six thirty. Mom's busy with it now. Turns out the casserole is on slow cook. Nancy is coming back with Jonathan at dinnertime. Dad's reading in the sitting room. My Supercom is turned off." He leaned closer and whispered, "*No one...* is gonna bother us for an hour or so."

Her eyes widened and she threw her arms around her boyfriend's neck. "Kiss me," she pleaded simply.

So he did. Their lips met hungrily, tongues brushing longingly, slipping over, under, around, exploring every inch of each other's mouths. Mike opened his eyes and found Eleven staring at him with fiery fervor and heartfelt determination. It was the same look she'd give him every time things eventually led to acts of a more *playful* nature.

She giggled daintily, her mouth fluttering against his with such an intensity that it sent shivers down his spine. "*Ohhh*," she teased. "Blanket fort?"

"*Mmmhhh...* most definitely," he breathed in between each of their ferocious lip locks.

The teens' heads bumped gently, relishing the intimacy and the closeness as their lips separated one last time. El put a finger to her

boyfriend's mouth, and he grabbed and sucked on it, lost in her unwavering gaze as she giggled from the sensation. The unspoken words still remained in her dark eyes, reflected straight back at her in his own. *I love you. I want you.*

He caressed El's face lightly, tracing a line from her ear, to one of her cute little dimples, to her smooth full lips. "I'll put on a movie and turn up the volume," he suggested with a cheeky grin, unwillingly letting her finger fall from his mouth. "The party always watches TV down here, so Mom and Dad are used to a bit of noise."

"Okay. Which movie?" she asked, stopping him in mid-motion, tilting her head in the direction of the VCR. And still not breaking eye contact with him. The top loading mechanism popped open with an audible clunk while El's hands busied themselves with the far more important task of undoing Mike's jeans and unzipping his fly. His quiet yelp of surprised pleasure was immediately followed by a much louder one the instant he caught sight of his VHS collection hovering in mid-air next to the TV.

"Uhh... umm..." he struggled. "Oh *shit*." El was still staring at him, but her hands had found his hard cock now. "Shitohshit. *Shit*, uhh... First Blood?"

El casually twitched her head once more and bent forward on the couch. The sound of the tape hitting the loader and slamming shut all but drowned out Mike's sudden sharp intake of breath as she tugged at his pants and socks, freeing them from his wriggling body.

Mike hastily shed his T-shirt, then reached for the buttons of El's floral-patterned top, trying to be helpful. She bit her bottom lip enticingly and looked down when he finally parted her blouse all the way, gasping and breaking out into cute little goosebumps as the centrally heated basement air hit her exposed skin for the first time.

In the background the movie that neither of them had any reason to watch started playing. Mike rolled Eleven's top off her shoulders and down her arms, his hands automatically going to her waistline next. She gave him a warm smile, and lifted her bottom with a quiet sigh, allowing him to peel her jeans the rest of the way off her body.

"El, you're *so* beautiful," he gushed awkwardly, stooping to pull the socks off her cute feet.

El blushed at his compliment, and bounced lightly on the couch. She slid her feet up Mike's bare legs with a fanciful and fully intentional smirk. He sucked in another breath when he felt her soles playfully capture and rub his cock, but just as quickly she moved them away again and made to stand up, offering him her hand. Mike grasped it and allowed his girlfriend to haul him soundly off the couch.

The teen lovers giggled at each other as they tiptoed naked towards the cozy little blanket fort. El yelped unexpectedly as her foot struck one of Will's dice containers on the floor, sending it flying across the basement.

"Shh, El!" Mike teased.

"You shh!" She crawled inside and tumbled onto the invitingly soft surface with another sigh. Mike was only a split second behind her, tugging the bedsheet into position across the entrance for some much-needed privacy.

"Still think the fort's not big enough for two?" he couldn't resist saying. He nestled up against El's warm body, enjoying her sweet gasp of delight when he flicked his tongue across one of her little nipples. He continued to pepper tiny kisses across her heaving chest, fingers dancing down her stomach and circling her belly button tenderly. He could feel the heat radiating from the junction of her legs, only mere inches away.

El grabbed Mike's inquisitive hand, using it as leverage to roll him onto his back next to her. She propped herself up on an elbow, the illumination from the night light accentuating her soft curves. "Big enough... if I'm *on top of you*," she whispered back, throwing a supple leg over his body and straddling him almost casually.

Mike looked down in genuine surprise at the sweet confluence of their bodies and exhaled in pleasure. "Is this where you tell me you saw... *something else*... in Will's dirty magazine?" he stammered, looking back up at El's beautiful face. He was painstakingly conscious of how close their most intimate parts were, and of how far away

those little foil packets of Nancy's happened to be right now.

"No, *silly*. Max and I-"

"Max? *Really*?"

"She told me about something called a *six-nine*."

He let out a small chuckle, reaching up to caress her face. "Oh shit. I bet that wasn't what Hopper had in mind when he agreed to let you study with *Madmax* Mayfield."

El rolled her eyes with a smile and opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say anything she was interrupted by the shrill ringing of the telephone in the background.

Mike groaned loudly. "Just ignore it," he breathed. "It's probably one of Mom's friends."

Sure enough, the phone kept ringing a few more times before falling silent. El let a satisfied moan escape her lips as she began grinding herself against him in a slow, torturous motion. Her curls tickled Mike's face as she whispered passionately in his ear, "Do you want to try it? *Six-nine*?"

"Oh my god El," Mike hissed through gritted teeth. "If you keep doing that, very soon I *won't* be able to."

Suddenly, to their absolute horror, they heard the sound of the basement door being flung open.

El froze and clutched at Mike, a sinking feeling forming in the pit of her stomach. Now was definitely NOT a good time for *anybody* to be coming downstairs. Especially not when there just happened to be two very naked and very aroused thirteen year olds getting up to some rather *risqué* business in their blanket fort.

Beneath her, the terrified look on her boyfriend's pale face indicated he was currently running through a list of suitable excuses in his head, and coming up *very* short. "El? I... I don't suppose you could open a portal to the Upside Down, right about now?" he squeaked lamely at her.

She found herself actually *wanting* to give it a try.

But then they heard the unmistakable voice of Ted Wheeler bellowing down the stairs.

"Michael! Jane! **Telephone!** It's Chief Hopper! *Jane's father!*"

And just as quickly, the door slammed shut again. To their palpable and unmitigated relief.

El rolled off Mike and stared in shock at the roof of the fort for several heartbeats, then squeezed her eyes shut and burst into a mad fit of giggling.

"Holy shit," Mike whispered into her ear, his voice dripping with tension. "Holyshitholyshitholy**SHIT** that was *sooo close*. If it was Mom she would've come downstairs for sure. Then... then I bet we'd have been grounded for the next *five years*." He slowly reached across her still shaking body and twitched the bedsheet open a crack.

El had already unwound the cord and was slowly levitating the phone off the pillar in the direction of the blanket fort. She turned away to wipe her nose as it settled onto the pillows next to them, then rested her head on Mike's chest drowsily. She could feel their combined heartbeats slowly returning to normal again.

"Ready?" she asked him.

Mike composed himself. "Let's hear what Hopper's got to say," he murmured as he reached for the receiver. "His brain would *explode* if he could see us right now."

Wow, this chapter was a long one. Looking back at my old notes post-S3, there's a certain bittersweet element to the idea of Mike and El spending the next four years at high school together. And going on a date at Starcourt. Speaking of which, I'd already intended to start writing about the mall a long time before I really knew what its significance would be. The Eastern Bloc angle was purely thrown in as another S3 reference now that all has been revealed, of course. Originally in my head I was going

to write them as Mafia.

The title of the book El shows to Mike at the start of this chapter was inspired by the one that the camera pans over in El's bedroom right at the beginning of the first episode of S3. It's such a cool establishing shot of how her life had started to change for the better. Go have a look, it'll warm your heart like it did mine. (There's even a slight easter egg too, for the observant!)

There's even more bittersweetness in the way I wrote Hopper this chapter. **sob** Bring him back, *please* :(

I'm so glad and humbled that people are still enjoying my story (thank you all!), and still relieved the events of S3 don't really affect it too much, even if a lot of the assumptions I made and incorporated have now well and truly been squashed. Apologies, I don't have much time at the moment to work on Mileven-related prompts and oneshots but if you PM me I can at least keep building a little list to work on at some point in the future.